# Out of the past
## reading Lacan and film noir

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# OUT OF THE PAST: READING LACAN AND FILM NOIR

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**Abstract**

This project proposes a new reading of the constitution of the critical category of film noir in terms of Lacan's theorisation of the retroactive construction of meaning. The thesis contends that, despite a turn away from Lacan in Film Studies, psychoanalytic theory must not be abandoned and – rather than regressing to questions of film, language and psychoanalysis articulated in the 1970s (Metz, *Screen*) – aims to plot a new trajectory, alongside theorists such as McGowan and Žižek, for such inquiry into the cinema. The relationship between psychoanalysis and noir is itself well-trodden ground; however, the major interventions (Kaplan, Krutnik) have been oriented towards questions of gender, leaving unexplored the possibility of noir's relation to Lacan's theory of signification. Specifically, this thesis engages the historiography of film noir (Naremore, Vernet, Elsaesser) with Lacan's theory of the *point de capiton* to work through the implications for a theory of discursive construction suggested by the registers of the Symbolic, Real and Imaginary. This thesis engages film and theory to discover not simply what Lacan can reveal about noir but crucially what noir can reveal about the structure of meaning. The project also explores various noir tropes as they raise theoretical questions: of particular interest are films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *D.O.A.* (1950) that are concerned with the retroactive production of knowledge. In addition, the roles of contingency and necessity in such a relationship to the past are investigated, and both the ontology of noir as a category and the structures of film noir narratives – such as *Gilda* (1946) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) – are explored in terms of the Lacanian theory of sets and concepts such as *lalangue* and suture; an extended reading of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) explores the Lacanian notion of fiction; and the idea of noir as genre is understood in terms of the function of the master signifier.

**Contents**

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**List of Abbreviations**

'*FN*ED': Marc Vernet, '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1-32

*FNR*: *Film Noir Reader*, 8th edn, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2006)

*FNR2*: *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999)

*FNR3*: *Film Noir Reader 3*, ed. by Robert Porfirio, Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002)

'FT': Marc Vernet, 'The Filmic Transaction (1983)', trans. by David Rodowick, in *FNR 2*, pp. 57-71

*LTL*: Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

*MBFN*: *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. by Ian Alexander Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1994)

*MTN*: James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, new edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)

*PFN*: *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006)

*S1*: Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. by John Forrester, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1991)

*S2*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-55*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Sylvana Tomaselli (London: Norton, 1991)

*S3*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-56*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 1997)

*S4*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La Relation d'objet*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1994)

*S5*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre V: Les Formations de l'inconscient*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1998)

*S6*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire VI: Le Désir est son interprétation, 1958-1959*, unpublished manuscript.

*S7*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Norton, 1997)

*S9*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire IX: L'Identification, 1960-1961*, unpublished manuscript.

*S11*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1977)

*S13*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIII: L'Objet de la psychanalyse, 1965-1966*, unpublished manuscript.

*S14*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La Logique du fantasme, 1966-1967*, unpublished manuscript.

*S15*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire XV: L'Acte psychanalytique, 1967-1968*, unpublished manuscript.

*S16*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2006)

*S17*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis 1969-70*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 2007)

*S18*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2006)

*S19*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIX: ...ou pire, 1971-1972*, unpublished manuscript.

*S20*: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love & Knowledge 1972-73*, trans. by Bruce Fink, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1998)

*S22*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXII: RSI, 1974-1975*, unpublished manuscript.

*S23*: Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome,* ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2005)

SE: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955)

*SN*: *Shades of Noir*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993)

*SOI*: Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989)

*WCA*: Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000)

**A Note on Terminology**

A crucial, if not *the* crucial, critical term in this study will be Lacan's "*point de capiton*", which has been translated variously as 'anchoring point' (Alan Sheridan), 'quilting point' (Russell Grigg) and 'nodal point' (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe).[1] Bruce Fink suggests 'button tie' as an English rendering because it suggests 'independent suspension:' the stitch holding things in place without anchoring them to a frame, the button and the fabric simply tied to each other.[2] To avoid confusion, the term will be used in the original French throughout, except in quotation. Its specific function – *capitonnage* – will also be retained in the original French, which has otherwise been translated as "quilting". Other Lacanian terms, such as jouissance, already borrowed into English will be left this way, except in instances where the original French has a theoretical implication: such as the "big Other" where the French "*Autre*" provides the Lacanian symbol "A", which will play an important role throughout this study. Furthermore, where a distinction in the original French has been lost in the standard English translation – such as Lacan's "*pas-tout*" and "not-whole"/"not-all" in Chapter 2 – the intricacies of such translations will themselves be discussed. Of course, this study's other key term – "film noir" – is itself borrowed from the French; as will be argued, the phrase has achieved such widespread Anglophone usage that, in general, it no longer needs to be considered "foreign" and italics will be used only in instances where the original French term – "*film noir*" – itself is being employed. For the sake of standardisation, the topic of this study will be "film noir" in the singular and "films noirs" in the plural, except in quotation where the original author's preference will be retained.

[1] Alan Sheridan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 154; Russell Grigg, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-56*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 1997), p. 258; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2001), p. xi.
[2] Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 113.

This is what happens, that after a movement has taken place, without people involved in it even knowing that it's a movement, along comes these students, who can't do the thing at all, but they become the experts on it, as it were. They write books interpreting the interpreters, and they create a special vocabulary. The thing that's terribly wrong with Kant is the goddamned vocabulary, and Freud too, you see.

– Edward Dmytryk[1]

## Introduction: Into the Past/Out of the Past

The idea for this project first suggested itself to me in the summer of 2006, when my interests in theory and film brought me, on the one hand, to Bruce Fink's *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* and Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and, on the other, to James Naremore's chapter on 'The History of an Idea' in his *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* and Marc Vernet's essay '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom' from Joan Copjec's collection, *Shades of Noir*.[2] The first of these texts – Fink's *Lacan to the Letter* – offered a way into the seemingly difficult thought of Jacques Lacan, and the second – Žižek's *Sublime Object* – pointed to the possibilities such an understanding could offer for, amongst other things, the study of film. Parallel to this, Naremore and Vernet's works necessitated a wholesale re-evaluation of my understanding of film noir, and brought together with Lacanian theory they suggested a new way of understanding the discursive constructions of film criticism. This in turn led me to further noir revisionists such as Thomas Elsaesser and his chapter, 'Caligari's Legacy? Film Noir as Film History's German Imaginary' from *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, and to Lacan's own writings: in particular, his third Seminar on *The Psychoses* and his *écrits*, 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud' and 'The Subversion of the Subject and the

[1] Robert Porfirio, 'Interview with Edward Dmytryk', in *Film Noir Reader 3*, ed. by Robert Porfirio, Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002), pp. 27-38 (p. 27).
[2] Fink, *LTL*; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, new edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Marc Vernet, '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1-32.

Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious'.[3] Here I found a structural corollary between the characterisation of film noir as a retroactively constituted critical category and Lacan's investigation, through the principles of structural linguistics, of the retroactive production of meaning. And as I watched again films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *D.O.A.* (1950), and saw them to be concerned throughout with the retroactive production of knowledge, it seemed to me then, that despite the sense in which "the time of Lacan" – or at least, *a certain version of Lacan* – had somehow passed in the study of the cinema, there still remained the richly suggestive possibilities of an exploration of Lacan and film, even over the heretofore well-trodden ground of film noir criticism.[4] No longer should Lacan be made to play the part of Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (1947), held forever responsible for the sins that went before.[5] This project will seek to revisit that intersection of psychoanalytic and film theories first articulated in the 1970s, to plot a new trajectory for Lacanian Film Studies.[6]

[3] Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000); Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-56*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 1997); 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 2007), pp. 412-441; 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious', in *Écrits*, pp. 671-702.

[4] *The Maltese Falcon*. Dir. John Huston. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1941; *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1944; *D.O.A.*. Dir. Rudolph Maté. USA, Cardinal Pictures, 1950.

[5] *Out of the Past*. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1947.

[6] This conjunction is of course being revisited by the work of other theorists (see the discussion below), alongside which this project is situated.

## 1. Film Noir/Film Theory/Psychoanalysis: Parallel Histories

The developments of cinema, psychoanalysis and film noir present important intersections in the history of Film Studies. Indeed, Vicky Lebeau charts the encounters between psychoanalysis and cinema from their appearance at the end of the Nineteenth Century: 1895 saw the inception of the cinema in the basements of the *Grand Café* on the *Boulevard des Capucines* as well as the publication of Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*.[7] Similarly, Janet Bergstrom's collection *Endless Night* charts the "parallel histories" of cinema and psychoanalysis.[8] Furthermore, as Andrew Spicer and Deborah Thomas note, the popularisation of psychoanalysis in America coincided with the emergence of film noir.[9] By 1925, Freud was already well-known enough in the USA for Sam Goldwyn to have offered him $100,000 for a screen play about love; in his biography of Freud, Ernest Jones describes the project as 'a film depicting scenes from the famous love stories of history, beginning with Anthony and Cleopatra,' he notes that Freud was 'amused' by the idea but ultimately turned it down.[10] However, it was not until films as diverse as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) – in which an analyst's expertise is mocked – and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) – which featured a surreal and expressive dream sequence – that the effect of psychoanalysis in Hollywood could truly be discerned.[11]

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[7] Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001).

[8] Janet Bergstrom, ed., *Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[9] Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Longman, 2002); Deborah Thomas, 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir', in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. by Ian Alexander Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1994), pp. 71-87.

[10] Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. III (New York: Basic Books, 1957), p. 453. However, Karl Abraham and Hanns Sachs *did* work with UFA on a psychoanalytic film (against Freud's protestations), which resulted in GW Pabst's *Geheimnisse einer Seele* (1926). Directed by one of the grandfathers of noir, the film's nightmare sequences (where, for example, the protagonist stages his uxoricidal fantasies) perhaps anticipate the classic noir dream sequences of *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and *The Woman in the Window* (1944).

[11] *Bringing Up Baby*. Dir. Howard Hawks. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1938; *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Dir. Boris Ingster. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1940.

Indeed, Deborah Thomas notes the Freudian references in *This Gun for Hire* (1942), where Alan Ladd's Raven reveals, 'Every night I dream. I read somewhere about a ... about a kind of doctor. A psych-something. You tell your dream, you don't have to dream it anymore', and *Christmas Holiday* (1944), where Deanna Durbin declares, 'When it was all over, a psychoanalyst said that Robert's relations with his mother were pathological'.[12] And from the slightly less pronounced Freudianisms of elicit or repressed sexuality in *Double Indemnity*, *Gilda* (1946) and *The Big Sleep* (1946) to the extended explorations of psychology and psychiatry in *Spellbound* (1945), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *The Dark Mirror* (1946) and *Whirlpool* (1949), a popularised version of psychoanalysis can be seen as one of the key determinants of the noir universe.[13] Indeed, this has been recognised by critics from Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, who list psychoanalysis in their 'Sources of Film Noir' and note that questions of "hidden meaning" and the play between eroticism and censorship characterise the series, to Paul Schrader, who insists that 'the roots of film noir are World War II, and German Expressionism, existentialism and Freud.'[14] Frank Krutnik is more specific, suggesting that it was *between* the emergence of hard-boiled fiction and its adaptation into film noir that psychoanalysis came to prominence in American culture, rendering it a dimension particular to the cinematic rather than literary exploration or noir; and more recently, Marlisa Santos has devoted a book-length study – *The Dark Mirror: Psychiatry and Film Noir* – to the argument that film noir was

[12] See Thomas, 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir', p.72. *This Gun for Hire*. Dir. Frank Tuttle. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1942; *Christmas Holiday*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. USA, Universal Pictures, 1944.

[13] *Gilda*. Dir. Charles Vidor. USA, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1946; *The Big Sleep*. Dir. Howard Hawks, USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1946; *Spellbound*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. USA, Selznick International Pictures, 1945; *The Woman in the Window*. Dir. Fritz Lang. USA, International Pictures, 1944; *The Dark Mirror*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. USA, International Pictures, 1946; *Whirlpool*. Dir. Otto Preminger. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1949.

[14] Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941-1953*, trans. by Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002), pp. 19 & 145; Schrader quoted in Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), p. 2.

utterly dependent upon the introduction of psychoanalytic principles, through, for example, the psychiatric treatment of war veterans.[15]

In fact, both psychoanalysis and classic film noir are themselves crucial to the development of academic Film Studies and film theory as a discourse. For example, Naremore notes, in the French tradition, the parallel trajectories of the terms "*auteur*" and "*film noir*" in the work of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group, both operating as the triumph of "style" – one individual and one collective – over the constraints of the studio system; he adds that, 'it is no accident that the two terms would enter the English language at the same time.'[16] In America, the rise of academic Film Studies in the late 1960s/early 1970s coincided with renewed popularity of film noir, for example in college film societies.[17] Mark Bould argues that in Britain, E Ann Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir* – as 'an intersection of feminism, Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and (post-)structuralism – was at the very centre of the theoretical developments then shaping Film Studies.'[18] And it is, moreover, the British tradition – in its relation to the French and American – that was central to the development of psychoanalytic film theory.

The principal site of this discourse was the journal *Screen*, which, as Philip Rosen notes, made a concerted effort to publish English translations of foreign critical works on film with the aim of establishing new modes of thinking in British film culture.[19] Indeed, in some reflections on the period, a leading light of the *Screen* group, Laura Mulvey, comments that:

> [t]he combination of popular cinema from across the Atlantic and theory from across the channel amount to [a] slap in the face to the traditional Englishness, that was, in

[15] Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 45; Marlisa Santos, *The Dark Mirror: Psychiatry and Film Noir* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).
[16] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 26.
[17] Ibid., p. 28.
[18] Mark Bould, *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 21.
[19] See Philip Rosen, '*Screen* and 1970s Film Theory', in *Inventing Film Studies*, ed. by Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008), pp. 264-297 (p. 266).

> many ways, characteristic of this generation [i.e. 1950s and 1960s UK critics], and constituted a rejection of English isolationism and chauvinism.[20]

Through this combination of Hollywood film productions and French film theory, *Screen* rapidly established itself as a leading venue for the critical examination of the cinema. This discourse can be traced back to 1970 and both Jean-Louis Baudry's essay 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', published in *Cinéthique*, and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group's collaborative reading of *Young Mr. Lincoln* and its translation published in *Screen* in 1972.[21] From this point, psychoanalysis became the dominant discourse of the journal, which itself became perhaps *the* leading publisher of Anglophone film theory informed by Freud and Lacan.

The most significant statement in this conjunction of psychoanalysis and cinema was, however, Christian Metz's essay, 'The Imaginary Signifier', published in 1975 in France in the journal *Communications* and soon after by *Screen*.[22] Metz began his career as a semiologist of the cinema, producing studies that expounded a structuralist understanding of film. He concluded, for example, that film was a language without a *langue* (a Saussurean language system of intercommunication, arbitrary signs, and double articulation); it could nonetheless be considered a language because it consisted of the ordering of signifying elements.[23] Metz's turn to psychoanalysis in 'The Imaginary Signifier' – broadly in the structuralist mode developed by Lacan – was then a logical progression of his semiological endeavours. Here he poses a fundamental

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[20] Laura Mulvey, 'A Short History of the BFI Education Department', unpublished pamphlet (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 2-3, quoted in David Sorfa, 'Laura Mulvey', in *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers*, ed. by Felicity Colman (London: Acumen, 2009), pp. 286-295 (p. 287).

[21] Originally published as Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base', *Cinéthique*, 7-8 (1970), 1-8; *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 'John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln: A collective text by the Editors of Cahiers du Cinéma', trans. by Helen Lackner and Diana Matias, *Screen*, 13, no. 3(1972), 5-44.

[22] This special issue of *Communications* was titled 'Psychanalyse et cinéma' and was edited by Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel and Christian Metz (see Bergstrom, *Endless Night*, p. 3).

[23] See Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford UP, 1974). He subsequently rearticulated his theory in terms of a semiotic code in *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974). Metz's semiology of the cinema entered *Screen* in 1973, taken up particularly in the work of Stephen Heath (for example, Stephen Heath, 'Film/Cinetext/Text', *Screen*, 14, no. 1/2 (1973), 102-128).

question: 'What contribution can Freudian psychoanalysis make to the study of the cinematic signifier?'[24] His answer was a theory of spectatorship that, for example, considered the modes of presence and absence in film as compared to theatre, leading him to the conclusion – quite Lacanian in its aphoristic quality – that 'every film is a fiction film,' which is to say, predicated upon *the presence of absence*.[25] Moreover, taking up Baudry's suggestions regarding the cinema and the mirror stage, Metz formulated a theory of cinematic identification (with both the mechanism and the content of the film) situated in the Lacanian Imaginary.[26] The possibilities of such a connection between Lacan and Film Studies led to a proliferation of psychoanalytic film theory in the work of critics such as Stephen Heath, Ben Brewster, and Colin MacCabe, and moreover, led to some of the most influential works of film theory in general: such as, Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' in which psychoanalysis, noir and Film Studies all converge to produce a theory of male castration anxiety that is formulated in terms of the noir femme fatale.[27] Introducing feminism to the theory of spectatorship, Mulvey's article thus suggested yet another possibility for the ideological critique of the cinema and has since become a canonical work in the field of not only film theory, but Film Studies more broadly.

Two years later, *Screen* again took up the theorisation of film and the Lacanian Imaginary in terms of the concept of "suture". The 'Dossier' on suture published in 1977 included Jacques-Alain Miller's original theoretical work, 'Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier' and Jean-Pierre Oudart's groundbreaking application of suture to

[24] Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. by Celia Britton et al., (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1982), p. 17.
[25] Ibid., p. 44.
[26] See Metz on primary and secondary cinematic identification, *Imaginary Signifier*, p. 56.
[27] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, no. 3 (1975), 6-18.

the cinema.[28] This work suggested that Miller's Lacanian theory of the relation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic could account for the continuity effect of the shot/reverse shot technique: the action of suture renders such filmic structures invisible to the spectator. Again, Stephen Heath was instrumental in the dissemination of this psychoanalytic theory; his article 'Narrative Space' first gestures towards these conceptions and subsequently, in his elaborations on suture in *Questions of Cinema*, Heath constructs a more generalised version of the theory, based on the 'rhythm of lack and absence.'[29] Kaja Silverman follows on from Heath, suggesting that suture can account for the role of the narrative as a whole as it constructs a position for the spectator.[30]

[28] *Screen*, 18, no. 4, 23-76. Interestingly, given the discussion of the *point de capiton* and retroactivity in the subsequent chapters, Oudart in fact describes suture in terms of the anticipatory signifier and the retroactive signified (see Jean-Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', *Screen*, 18, no. 4, 35-47 (p. 37)).

[29] Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', *Screen*, 17, no. 3 (1976), 68-112; Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 98. Philip Rosen argues that Heath's work 'can be considered a reply to certain less-nuanced articles in *Film Quarterly*, which introduced the Lacanian metaphor of suture into English (Rosen, *Inventing Film Studies*, p. 296n26).

[30] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), p. 212. Suture in fact dies out in *Screen* completely in the 1990s: between 1993 and 1999, the term appears only once – interestingly, in a review of Krutnik and Copjec's books on film noir (Barry Taylor, 'Review: Joan Copjec Ed., Shades of Noir: A Reader; Frank Krutnik, in a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity', *Screen*, 36, no. 2 (1995), 172-176).

## 2. Contra Lacan

However, the backlash against psychoanalytic theory (and psychoanalytically-informed feminism) in Film Studies was almost immediate. In 1976, even before the development of suture, four of *Screen*'s editors announced that they could no longer contribute to the publication, whose dominant discourse was now the 'unnecessarily obscure and inaccessible' psychoanalytic theory of film.[31] The efforts of the *Screen* theorists in the late 1970s served to establish psychoanalysis as one of the dominant discourses in theoretical investigations into film, and as a result, the criticisms of such theory have continued unabated since that point. More recently, for example, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's collection *Post-Theory* sets itself up in express opposition to the 'aggregate of doctrines' and the 'vagaries of Grand Theory' represented specifically by the *Screen* appropriations of Structuralist Marxism and Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis, and insists instead upon a cognitivist, empirical approach to the cinema.[32] Moreover, there has been, since the 1990s, a general turn away from psychoanalysis in Film Studies, towards a range of possibilities offered by philosophical investigations into the cinema. For example, Vivian Sobchack's existential-phenomenological project in *The Address of the Eye*, opposes a psychoanalytically-oriented understanding of the film as an object of vision, and formulates instead a notion of embodied vision inspired by Merleau-Ponty.[33] More generally, there has been a

[31] Edward Buscombe, et al., 'Why We Have Resigned from the Board of *Screen*', *Screen*, 17, no. 2 (1976), 106-109 (p. 107). The 50th anniversary of *Screen* has been cause for retrospection in the journal, and this incident is now seen as part of the rich history of the development of intellectual discourses on film (See Annette Kuhn, '*Screen* and Screen Theorizing Today', in *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009), 1-12).

[32] David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. xiii, xiv. This work is part of a broader rejection of late twentieth century French thought, which reached fever pitch with Sokal and Bricmont's *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile, 1999).

[33] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992). It is a sign of Sobchack's eclectic range of work that she should also have written – in a very different context – an essay on film noir that explores the time and space of noir as they are disrupted by a crisis in American values (Vivian Sobchack, '"Lounge Time": Post-War Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir', in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. by Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 129-170). See also her essay on *The Maltese Falcon*, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Deleuzian-inspired movement away from what is perceived as the ocularcentric, psychoanalytic "*Screen* Theory" discourse towards theorising the cinema in terms of affective and bodily sensations; for example, in the work of Patricia Pisters and Barbara Kennedy.[34] And Laura U Marks' work stands out in this field for its combination of Sobchack's theory of subjectivity and a formulation of a Deleuzian haptic visuality in opposition to psychoanalytic optic visuality.[35]

Perhaps most interesting in this Deleuzian vein are the works of Steven Shaviro and Daniel Frampton. Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* presents a radical rejection of the 'psychoanalytic model currently in vogue in academic discussions of film theory.'[36] This wildly polemical text compares psychoanalytic film theory to the suffocating orthodoxy of a religious cult and aims to explode this hegemonic paradigm by introducing to the viewing experience a Deleuzian notion of the body in its capacity to be affected. In contrast to this "cinematic body", Frampton's *Filmosophy* presents a "filmind" – a Deleuzian notion of film thinking that is almost entirely blind to psychoanalytic considerations.[37] The field of film theory has then developed far beyond the semiotic and psychoanalytic thinking of the "*Screen*" period. For example, Frampton is the founder of the *Film-Philosophy* journal, which endeavours to bring both continental and analytic philosophy and Film Studies together in productive ways, publishing for example special issues on Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean Baudrillard, and organising an annual international conference that supports not only work on the classic film theorists such as Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, but also emerging encounters

[34] Patricia Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003); Barbara M. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000).
[35] Laura U Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).
[36] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. viii.
[37] Frampton's only reference to Lacan is a misquotation: 'the *subconscious* is structured like a language' (Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower, 2006), p. 150, emphasis added).

between film and the philosophies of Alain Badiou or Ludwig Wittgenstein.[38] Scholarship within the area of film-philosophy is then not limited to the Deleuzian field, with, for example, Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton's *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, suggesting further possibilities for philosophical engagement with the cinema outside of the psychoanalytic film theory developed in this project.

[38] As will be noted below, there has also been a Lacan issue of the journal.

### 3. In Defence of a Lost Cause?

Is psychoanalytic film theory then in a terminal decline? The answer must be a resounding *No!* The picture in the new millennium was certainly bleak: Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle declared that, '[w]ithin film studies, not only has Lacanian psychoanalytic theory disappeared, but theory as such has given way almost completely to historicism and empirical research. The discipline has become, as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll prophesied in 1996, post-theoretical.'[39] This was reiterated by Richard Rushton who noted that, 'the engagement between psychoanalysis and cinema has, to a large degree, disappeared,' and Slavoj Žižek, who read the decline of the status of suture theory as an 'indication of the decline of cinema studies.'[40] It is, however, with such thinkers that the fate of (Lacanian) psychoanalytic film theory rests. First and foremost is Žižek who, along with his Slovene colleagues (particularly Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič) and Joan Copjec, is responsible for the continued interest in Lacanian theory and its relation to the cinema.[41] Stephen Heath observes that, '[s]uture is no longer doing too well, nor, on the whole, is fetishism; the phallus is mostly holding up, while fantasy is fine but prone to disparate appreciations; as for real and symptom, they have come up strong indeed,' and goes to argue that this is as a result of what he calls '"Žižek-film":' the exciting new possibilities suggested by Žižek's Lacanian interrogation of the cinema.[42] Indeed, it is particularly interesting to note that in a recent article Shaviro softens the stance taken in *The Cinematic Body* against psychoanalysis. He admits that

[39] Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle, 'Introduction: Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Film Theory', in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, ed. by McGowan and Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004), pp. xi-xxix (p. xii n1).
[40] Richard Rushton, 'Cinema's Double: Some Reflections on Metz', *Screen*, 43, no. 2 (2002), 107-118 (p. 107); Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, (London: BFI, 2001), p. 31.
[41] See, for example, Žižek, *SOI* and Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
[42] Stephen Heath, 'Cinema and Psychoanalysis: Parallel Histories' in *Endless Night*, pp. 25-56 (pp. 33 & 36). Although Heath perhaps overlooks Žižek's rethinking of suture and "interface" in *The Fright of Real Tears* (pp. 39-54).

there is another Lacan suggested by the work of Žižek, and closes ranks with psychoanalytic theory in the face of a common threat from Bordwellian cognitivism.[43]

In *The Fright of Real Tears*, Žižek launches a robust defence of Theory against Bordwell and Carroll, suggesting that the critique of *Post-Theory* should be considered 'The Strange Case of the Missing Lacanians.'[44] Žižek insists that he does not recognise the "Lacanian" theory described by Bordwell; this "Grand Theory" is a straw man, an effigy of Mulvey and Silverman who are not "Lacanians", Žižek insists, but film theorists *who have engaged with Lacan*. Indeed, this engagement owes as much to Althusser as it does to Lacanian theory itself; Althusser's work provided an approach to psychoanalysis through the critique of ideology that was in accord with the expressly political motivations of the so-called *Screen* theorists.[45] Žižek thus complains that, 'as a Lacanian, I seem to be caught in an unexpected double-bind: I am, as it were, being deprived of what I never possessed, made responsible for something others generated as Lacanian film theory. My response to this, of course: what if one should finally give Lacan himself a chance?'[46] McGowan reiterates this argument, insisting that such an understanding of psychoanalysis is mistaken, predicated upon an 'Imaginary Lacan.'[47] The rejection of what has been characterised as "Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory" in the philosophical turn is thus unfounded; a valid critique of 1970s *Screen* theorising perhaps, but it can claim no basis in a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Film Studies.[48] As McGowan himself argues in *The Real Gaze*, the notion of the Gaze attributed to *Screen* Theory is not to be found on the side of the Subject; rather, it must

[43] Steven Shaviro, 'The Cinematic Body: Redux', *parallax*, 14, no. 1 (2008), 48-54. Furthermore, in 2007 the *Film-Philosophy* journal published a special edition devoted to this new wave of Lacanian theory (11, no. 3), and continues to support psychoanalytically-informed film theoretical work, and the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* devoted an early issue to 'Žižek and Cinema' (1, no. 3 (2007)).
[44] Žižek, *Fright*, p. 1.
[45] In fact, as Philip Rosen observes, an important translator of Althusser – Ben Brewster – served as the chief editor of *Screen* (*Inventing Film Studies*, p. 271).
[46] Žižek, *Fright*, p. 2.
[47] McGowan and Kunkle, *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, p. xiii.
[48] In point of fact, *Screen* theorists did not *endorse* this model of the cinema; the point was to establish ways in which to *resist* its Imaginary interpellation.

be considered a properly Lacanian object, *objet petit (a)*.[49] McGowan's work – which includes both a Lacanian-auteur study of David Lynch and the aforementioned Lacanian theory of the film experience – is therefore at the forefront of a new wave of film theory which suggests that, far from being exhausted, from having not enough to say, the work of Lacanian investigation into the cinema has only just begun.[50]

And indeed, far beyond this, the more general project of psychoanalytic Film Studies is once again a burgeoning field: for example, Vicky Lebeau's article, 'The arts of looking: D.W. Winnicott and Michael Haneke' in *Screen* represents an emergent object-relations theory.[51] Film theory and Jung come together in Christopher Hauke and Ian Alister's collection, *Jung & Film: Post-Jungian Takes on the Moving Image* and Greg Singh's *Film After Jung*.[52] Freud lives too, in Mulvey's work on the uncanny and the death drive in the filmic image in *Death 24x a Second*, and through Laplanche's interpretation of *Nachträglichkeit* as employed by Paul Sutton in 'Afterwardsness in Film'.[53] There is also renewed interest in the psychoanalytically-informed feminisms of Kristeva and Irigaray, represented by Katherine Goodnow's *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis* and Caroline Bainbridge's *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce*

[49] It is interesting to note that beside the discourse on the gaze in film, there is a discourse on Lacan's other innovative partial object, the voice. Michel Chion's notion of the acousmatic voice is inflected by Lacan's reading of the fort/da game (Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), Silverman takes up Chion's work to explore a fantasmatic construction of the maternal voice in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) (Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988)), and Mladen Dolar incorporates the acousmatic voice as well as numerous filmic examples into his philosophy of the voice (Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)).

[50] Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). In *The Real Gaze*, McGowan persuasively argues, for example, that a Deleuzian critique of "Lacanian film theory" such as Gaylyn Studlar's 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema' in fact has much in common with Lacan's own theory of desire, as expressed in *Le Séminaire V* (pp. 9-10).

[51] Vicky Lebeau, 'The Arts of Looking: D.W. Winnicott and Michael Haneke', *Screen*, 50, no. 1 (2009), 35-44.

[52] *Jung & Film: Post-Jungian Takes On The Moving Image*, ed. by Christopher Hauke and Ian Alister (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001); Greg Singh, *Film After Jung: Post-Jungian Approaches to Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[53] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006); Paul Sutton, 'Afterwardsness in Film: Patrice Leconte's *Le Mari de la Coiffeuse*', *French Studies*, 53, no. 3 (1999), 307-17.

*Irigaray, Women and Film*.[54] Such developments accord with the sentiment expressed by Janet Bergstrom in the introduction to her collection on psychoanalysis and cinema, where she insists that this discourse 'has renewed itself over time and remains one of the most vital areas within contemporary film theory,' and points to the sense of "unfinished business" that motivates each new turn in psychoanalytic Film Studies.[55]

[54] Katherine Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Caroline Bainbridge's *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[55] Bergstrom, *Endless Night*, p. 2.

## 4. Theorising Noir

Such unfinished business extends to a new way of approaching even the perennial favourite of film criticism, film noir. Work on the ontology of noir appears broadly to fall into two categories: the endeavour to define noir, first in France in the 1940s and then in America in the 1970s, and then the consideration of the relationship between noir and criticism itself. It will be the role of the first chapter to explore the development of such noir criticism in full – from Nino Frank to Paul Schrader and beyond – so it will suffice to say at this point that it is in particular the revisionist work of three authors – Naremore, Vernet, and Elsaesser – that will serve as a starting point for the investigation of film noir in this project. Žižek in fact comments upon the theoretical paucity of work associated with the first movement in noir criticism, characterising it as a bric-à-brac of clichés and suggesting that, '[i]nstead of directly trying to supplant them with a new better theory, our first step should therefore be a kind of "metacommentary".'[56] Elsewhere, Žižek gestures towards the metacommentary of the second, self-reflexive movement in noir criticism. He references Naremore's 'cognitive semantics' with its radial structure of family resemblance and takes up Vernet's rejection of noir – primarily as a means of critiquing the notion of 'poststructuralist deconstruction' (conversely to noir, an American invention of French origin) – to suggest that the category functions as a Hegelian concept, a 'structuring principle.'[57] Žižek reiterates this notion in *The Fright of Real Tears*, characteristically adding a new twist by discussing noir in terms of the structural necessity of the exception in the construction of the universal.[58]

[56] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 149-150.
[57] Slavoj Žižek, 'Da Capo Senza Fine', in Judith Butler, et al., *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 213-262 (p. 244).
[58] Žižek, *Fright*, p. 27. This topic will be taken up in the discussion of the ontology of noir in Chapter 3.

However, aside from Žižek's brief notes, theorisation of the second movement in noir criticism is lacking.[59] Both Naremore and Elsaesser make remarks to the effect that there is perhaps a dimension of *Nachträglichkeit* in film noir. Naremore describes a postmodern condition in which the idea of noir has become a worldwide image and features in high fashion editorials; he suggests that 'our contemporary fascination with noir may entail a sort of *Nachträglichkeit*, or method of dealing with the present by imagining a primal scene.'[60] This is, however, the extent of his insight. The theoretical ambitions of his project are not far-reaching; as he himself professes, 'my own approach has less to do with (...) theory than with cultural and social history.'[61] Naremore invokes Freud but briefly, as an aside to his historiography. His investigation of noir is crucial to any understanding of the formation of the category, but its implications for critical theory have not been realised. Elsaesser is more theoretically engaged; his concept of the "historical imaginary" depends upon an explicitly Lacanian invocation and his suggestion that the category's most striking feature is its 'historical imaginary as deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*)' requires the further discussion it will receive in Chapter 3.[62] Elsaesser's work does not, however, entail a detailed exploration of structure and retroaction in film noir and its relation to Lacanian theory. A further critic, Steffen Hantke, makes a similar connection between a 'constructionist' view of film noir and deferred action but his brief article quickly abandons this richly suggestive observation in favour of other considerations.[63] It is perhaps unsurprising that this sort of parallel has before been suggested – it is a truism that film noir is a retroactive category – but the possibilities of this comparison for an enquiry into psychoanalysis and the

[59] There is one exception to this general condition: Mark Conard's article on the definition of noir takes up the problem in terms of Nietzschean philosophy (Mark T. Conard, 'Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir', in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2006), pp. 7-22). This piece is the standout work in an otherwise flimsy volume on *The Philosophy of Film Noir*.
[60] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 4.
[61] Ibid., p. 6.
[62] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 423.
[63] Steffen Hantke, 'Boundary Crossing and the Construction of Cinematic Genre: Film Noir As "Deferred Action"', *Kinema*, 22 (Fall 2004), 5-18 (p. 6).

cinema have not been brought out. Such work provides but the ground on which this fully-realised theoretical project on film noir must be built.

## 5. Lacan and Noir: *Encore*

Heretofore, psychoanalytic work on film noir has largely been oriented towards questions of sex and gender, and the field is extensive.[64] The femme fatale has been the subject of widespread psychoanalytic scrutiny: Kaplan's landmark collection *Women in Film Noir*, which includes psychoanalytically oriented work by Claire Johnston and Patricia White, is a founding moment of this discourse, which is taken further by Kaplan herself in *Women and Film*.[65] It is continued by Elizabeth Cowie, who contributed the Freudian-inflected 'Women and *Film Noir*' to Copjec's *Shades of Noir* and elsewhere suggests that the femme fatale is a 'catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference.'[66] The work of both Mary Ann Doane and James Maxfield explore the noir femme in terms of male fears of female sexuality (see in particular, Doane's insight into the role of femininity as epistemological trouble in 'Gilda: Epistemology as Strip Tease').[67] Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo take up a notion of noir anxiety – over sex and race – in terms of Kristeva's theory of abjection; and Kaplan – again – presents a psychoanalytic-postcolonial exploration of femininity in *Cat People* (1942).[68] Elisabeth Bronfen investigates the modes of jouissance available to the noir man and woman, and Juliet Flower MacCannell patriarchy, Law and jouissance in the two versions of *Cape Fear*

[64] Lacan's own intersection with noir is tenuous, through degrees of separation via the Surrealists. In fact, Surrealism was key to the development of *both* Lacanian theory and – as Naremore suggests – film noir: in his early career Lacan's work received praise from Dali in the first issue of the journal *Minotaure*, edited by Robert Breton and in which Lacan would later publish his own work. See Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and History of a System of Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) (pp. 60 & 136); Naremore, 'A Season in Hell or the Snows of Yesteryear?', in *Panorama*, pp. vii-xxi (pp. x-xii). The authors of the *Panorama* were of course themselves associated with the Surrealist movement, and Breton later collaborated with Raymond Borde on his documentary short *Molinier* (1966).

[65] Claire Johnston, '*Double Indemnity*', in *Women in Film Noir*, rev. and expanded edn, ed. by E Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 89-98; Patricia White, 'Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*', in *Women in Film Noir*, pp. 130-150; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, University Paperbacks (London: Methuen, 1983).

[66] Elizabeth Cowie, '*Film Noir* and Women', pp. 121-166; *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 125.

[67] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1991); James Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996).

[68] Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Kaplan, 'Darkness Within: Or, the Dark Continent of Film Noir', in *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 99-131.

(1962) and (1991).[69] Copjec too takes up the femme fatale and 'lethal jouissance' in an extended discussion of the Lacanian logic of sexuation.[70] Even Žižek's most sustained examination of film noir is in fact in terms of the femme fatale's role as "Woman" in the construction of "man", and her relation to the obscene-knowing Father.[71] Representing the "other side" of sexual difference, Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street* presents an investigation of the 'noir phenomenon' in terms of a crisis of masculinity and a Freudo-Lacanian framework.[72] Elsewhere, Robert Lang explores homophobia and the Freudian phallus in *Kiss Me Deadly*, and Lee Edelman the Father and the phallus in Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*.[73]

There are, moreover, works that examine *aspects* of noir from a psychoanalytic perspective, which do not necessarily entail questions of sex and gender. For example, Hugh Manon's 'Some Like it Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*', which draws upon Metz, Freud and Lacan to explore a "fetishistic" desire to commit a crime in *Double Indemnity*; and Deborah Thomas' aforementioned 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir', which despite its title, offers a discussion of noir informed by Deleuze and Guattari and could then perhaps be more honestly titled '*Anti*-Psychoanalysis and Film Noir'.[74] There are psychoanalytically-informed investigations of noir narrative and structure: Maureen Turim's *Flashbacks in Film* contains a chapter on film noir

[69] Elisabeth Bronfen, '*Noir* Wagner', in *Sexuation*, ed. by Renata Salecl (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), pp. 170-215; Juliet Flower MacCannell, 'Between the Two *Fears'* in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, pp. 47-82.

[70] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, pp. 197-200. Here Copjec also discusses suture and the "locked room mystery", which will be explored in Chapter 4.

[71] Žižek, *Enjoy*, pp. 149-193; *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 102; *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 74.

[72] Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 24; Lee Edelman, 'Plasticity, Paternity, Perversity: Freud's Falcon, Huston's Freud', *American Imago*, 51, no. 1 (1994), 69-104; Robert Lang, 'Looking for the "Great Whatzit": "Kiss Me Deadly" and Film Noir', *Cinema Journal*, 27, no. 3 (1988), 32-44. A more recent piece, Carlos V Reyes' 'Film Noir's Dark Secret "or" What Does the Hysteric Want?', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 19, no. 1 (2010), 75-88, in fact returns to questions of femininity to discuss noir as genre and the question of hysteria.

[73] Lee Edelman, 'Plasticity, Paternity, Perversity: Freud's Falcon, Huston's Freud', *American Imago*, 51:1 (1994), 69-104; Robert Lang, 'Looking for the "Great Whatzit": "Kiss Me Deadly" and Film Noir', *Cinema Journal* (1988) 27.3, 32-44.

[74] Hugh Manon, 'Some Like it Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*', *Cinema Journal*, 44, no. 4 (2005), 18-43; Thomas, 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir'.

flashbacks and Freud's theory on death and repetition; and JP Telotte's *Voices in the Dark*, while not a psychoanalytic study as such, does draw upon Freudian and Lacanian theory at certain points, such as on spectatorship and the mirror stage.[75] Moreover, the increasingly general condition in the contemporary encounter between psychoanalysis and film noir is the (sometimes passing) reference in one context to the other: either theoretical works that refer to film noir, or works of film criticism and analysis that refer to psychoanalysis.[76] As noted above, Thomas Elsaesser draws upon a Lacanian notion to explore noir and German cinema, and Naremore's book is peppered with references to Freud. Robert Miklitsch uses films noirs such as *Woman in the Window* and *The Maltese Falcon* to critique Žižek's Lacanian theory of fantasy, and Henry Bond's book on Lacanian criminal psychology, *Lacan at the Scene*, mentions certain crime scene photos which 'come close to resembling stills from film noir classics.'[77] Lutz Peter Koepnick – also exploring German cinema – makes some comments, via the work of Kaja Silverman, on Lacan, speech and 'vocophilia' in film noir; and again, with reference to the space of the crime scene, Edward Dimendberg – in his resolutely non-psychoanalytic study, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* – makes references to Freud's theories of memory and the uncanny and the briefest of references to Lacan's Seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*.[78] Such works are then a testament to the position of

[75] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 143-188; JP Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 146 & 162. Telotte also draws, more extensively, upon Foucault and Merleau-Ponty, as well as de Certeau and Deleuze and Guattari.

[76] This remains the case with recent essays on noir and woman: Philippa Gates', exploration of women in men's roles in 'The Maritorious Melodrama: Film Noir with a Female Detective', *Journal of Film and Video*, 61, no. 3 (2009), 24-39, and Mark Osteen's discussion of the fetishised female image, in 'Framed: Forging Identities in Film Noir', *Journal of Film and Video*, 62, no. 3 (2010), 17-35, draw upon psychoanalytic principles in otherwise film-critical essays.

[77] Robert Miklitsch, 'Flesh for Fantasy: Aesthetics, the Fantasmatic, and *Film Noir*' in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. by Jeff Boucher, et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2005), pp. 47-68; Henry Bond, *Lacan at the Scene* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 119.

[78] See Lutz Peter Koepnick, *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema Between Hitler And Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 182; Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), pp. 128-129, p. 164; p. 268n17.

both psychoanalysis and film noir in the cultural imagination and the contemporary critical idiom.

Noir criticism has not, however, always been receptive to such psychoanalytic theory. Alain Silver's dispute with the work of Marc Vernet over noir and structuralism shows that the rejection of Theory is not limited to cognitivism and Deleuzian film-philosophy.[79] Indeed, to the uninitiated Vernet's suggestions that the problem of film noir is whether '[t]o commit or not to commit incest' might sound like a bizarre pronouncement.[80] However, understood in its properly structuralist – that is, Lévi-Straussian and Lacanian – context, such a statement contributes to a complex discussion of the structure of noir narratives. Combined with Vernet's problematisation of noir in 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', such work provides a basis for further exploration of film noir. Moreover, the suggestions made in the work of Žižek and Copjec, and of Vernet and Elsaesser present an opportunity to theorise the emergence of the category of film noir, as described by Naremore and as it appears in the work of Frank, Chartier, Borde and Chaumeton. Taking the notion of a cinematic category formed after the fact and subject to subsequent, retroactive determination, made up in part by a group of films that depict or are structured by the retroactive production of knowledge, an intersection between the fields of film noir and psychoanalytic theory is suggested. And such an intersection can, in turn, suggest new understanding of, for example, Lacanian set theory and provide fresh insight into the question of film genre. Beyond previous psychoanalytic interventions on film noir and gender, and avoiding the regressive move suggested by Richard Rushton's reconsideration of Metz, it will be possible to return to the intersection of film, psychoanalysis and language to plot a new trajectory for film

[79] See, for example, Alain Silver, 'Introduction', in *Film Noir Reader*, 8th edn, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2006), pp. 3-15.
[80] Marc Vernet, 'The Filmic Transaction (1983)', trans. by David Rodowick, in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), pp. 57-71 (p. 69).

theory.[81] The aim here is not to diminish or reject such earlier work (for example, Krutnik or Metz), indeed considerations of structure and gender are as inseparable in film noir as they are in Lacanian theory; rather the aim is to take psychoanalytic enquiry in a new direction, carrying forth with it some of the valuable insights such work has granted. Indeed, articles mentioned above by Doane and Edelman, as well as the non-psychoanalytic portion of Krutnik's investigation of noir, definition and genre, will be vital to the exploration of film noir in this project.

And furthermore, while Metz stands as a crucial figure in the development of first semiological and then psychoanalytic investigations of film, this project will aim to achieve quite different goals in its deployment of such theory.[82] Film noir narratives will be approached through structural linguistic principles, not in an effort to categorise their scenes in a *Grande Syntagmatique*, but to understand the temporality involved in a film where a final, climactic scene confers (new) meaning on all the scenes that have preceded it. And films will themselves be treated as signifiers in a critical discourse, as differential elements in a system of relations, which constitutes, for example, a film genre. Metz used psychoanalysis to understand *why* people were drawn to the cinema, and discussed the interplay of absence and presence offered by the medium in terms of fiction and the Imaginary. Again, both of these terms play a crucial role in this investigation of film noir, but to very different ends: instead of "why", this project will examine *how films are read and categorised*, not only in terms of the Imaginary, but also the Symbolic and the Real, and, importantly, Lacan's version of set theory. The thesis engages with similar questions of language and structure as those articulated by Metz, not in an effort to produce, for example, an ontology of the cinema but in order to understand the critical processes which surround the cinema as well as produce

[81] See Rushton, 'Cinema's Double'.
[82] It is interesting to note that Marc Vernet dedicates his essay, '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom' to the then recently deceased Metz. See p. 26.

extended, close analyses of individual films themselves.[83] And so, while this project will proudly claim Metz as an intellectual predecessor, it also aims to move far beyond his own deployment of structuralism and psychoanalytic theory.[84]

Moreover, it is not enough simply to bring (Lacanian) theory to bear on films, nor solely to use film as a means of illustrating theory. In order to avoid the stultifying practice of "applied theory", where moribund structures and terms are imposed upon a given cultural object ('A Lacanian/Feminist/Deleuzian Perspective On...'), as well as the subordination of film to theory, whereby it serves only as corroboration in the form of the example, film theory should endeavour *to do the work of theory*. Of course it must always bring new insights to a film or films, or indeed the medium itself (there would otherwise be little point in the enterprise) but film theory must also look to the ways in which it is possible to *theorise with film*, to explore the ways in which films offer a challenge to theory: as much what *The Maltese Falcon* can reveal about Lacan as what Lacan can reveal about *The Maltese Falcon*. This will ensure film theory remains a living, breathing discourse, sensitive to the exigencies of a film as much as any pre-given conceptual framework. As such there will be portions of this project devoted solely to film critical or historical topics, or to Lacanian theory alone; however, these will be necessary steps required to prepare the ground for a fully engaged discussion of both noir and Lacan together. Therefore, engaging Lacan and film noir in a dialectical relation, which avoids such a subordination of film to theory or theory to film, can serve to initiate an investigation of the structures of noir in comparison with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to produce a new understanding of the formation and function of the category and its constituent films. This can be achieved, in the first instance,

[83] In *The Imaginary Signifier*, for example, Metz discusses cinema in more general terms, seldom making more than passing references to specific films.

[84] This is in contrast to Warren Buckland's *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), which gives an overview of contemporary critics such as Michel Colin, Roger Odin and Dominique Chateau who have taken up Metz's semiotics for a cognitive approach to film theory.

through a reconsideration of the structural linguistic import of Lacan's theory of the '*point de capiton*,' which is currently understood largely in terms of Laclau and Mouffe's 'nodal point' and its development by Žižek as the ideological 'quilting point.'[85] Elaboration of this concept will also require an interrogation of Lacan's deployment of set theory and the philosophical notion of fiction in order to explain the *point de capiton*/master signifier distinction at work in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

To this end, the first chapter will take the idea of film noir as a retroactive critical category as its starting point. Beginning with an overview of the development of the idea of noir, through work in the 1940s in France, 1970s in America and again more recently, this chapter will restate the truism of film criticism that film noir is a retroactive category – a critical concept posited ex post facto – and it will be noted that such retroactivity can also be discerned in the narratives of certain key films noirs. The psychoanalytic theory of retroactivity will then be introduced: from Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or "afterwardsness" to the Lacanian *après-coup* it will be established as a fundamental principle of psychoanalysis. It will be argued that retroactivity in psychoanalytic theory establishes a relation of meaning between two events, and it is through the idea of meaning that Lacan's structure of the *point de capiton* will be introduced as a central theoretical concept of not only the chapter, but also the project as a whole. The *point de capiton* expresses Lacan's theory of the relation between past, present and future, the anticipation of meaning and its subsequent, retroactive determination. The main contention of this chapter will then be that the concept of film noir can be understood in terms of this Lacanian *point de capiton*: as a signifier, an ordering principle, that intervenes after the fact to confer meaning upon a disparate group of films. It will be argued that the signifier "noir" functions this way in 1946 for the French critics who first "discovered" American film noir, and then again for the

[85] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 112; Žižek, *SOI*, p. 7.

American film critics of the 1970s who (re)discovered the French term as a means of understanding their own past. Having established noir as a *point de capiton* in critical discourse, the chapter will then move to the consideration of individual films noirs themselves to suggest that a similar structure can be found in the retroactively structured narratives of *The Maltese Falcon* or *Double Indemnity* so that a corollary can be found between the shape of certain film noir narratives and the category to which they belong. Finally, *Gilda* and *The Killers* will suggest a way in which to understand the progressive vector of the *point de capiton*: the unfolding of the chain of signifiers in the anticipated certainty of its completion at a later point. It will be argued that these films present "letters", floating signifiers that require the addition of another signifier to confirm their meaning.

Chapter 2 will take the work on film noir of Marc Vernet as its starting point, exploring the ways in which his analyses can be understood in terms of the relationship between the Lacanian Symbolic and Real. Beginning with a reading of his essay, 'The Filmic Transaction', this chapter will propose that his examination of noir narrative structure – in terms of a "set up" and the explosion of a "black hole" – can be reconsidered as an expression of Lacan's theory of trauma as tuché and automaton that is set out in *Seminar XI*: as the symbolic machinery that works in response to the intrusion of some traumatic event, which cannot be directly symbolised but nonetheless has a powerful effect on the shape of this symbolic structure. Vernet will be vigorously defended against the critique of Alain Silver, who attempts to dismiss this work as mere theoretical excess. Instead it will be shown that Vernet offers an intelligent study of noir that can serve as a point of departure for a Lacanian theory of film noir narrative. From here, the concept of the Real will be taken further, as a conceptualisation of impossibility and failure. This will entail a journey into the archives of film noir criticism to explore contemporaneous reactions in the period identified as classic film

noir to understand the ways in which the American tradition in the 1940s and 1950s might – following Vernet's deconstruction of the category in '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom' – offer problems for the somewhat Eurocentric characterisation of noir offered in Chapter 1. Sheri Biesen's thesis in *Blackout* that noir was referred to as a "red meat" film cycle in the American press will be discussed as just such a problem and will itself then be found wanting. In the final, and most significant, development of this chapter, Vernet's dissolution of the noir category will be taken as a point of departure for a Lacanian ontology of film noir – based in the theory of feminine sexuation (understood as a *logical* rather than biological category) – as a non-universalisable, and thus open, set.

Chapter 3 will offer first a response to this open ontology of noir, proposing that the project to define noir, as exemplified by Frank Krutnik, amongst others, can be understood in terms of the Lacanian logic of masculine sexuation. This chapter will argue that any determinate definition of noir (or a definition as such) is impossible because the Symbolic order offers no firm ground on which a defining statement can rest. Through a reconsideration of the concept of "suture", in its original context as the relationship between zero and one, void and structure, a solution to this impossibility will be offered: imaginary borders must be established – through a "masculine" logic of inclusion/exclusion – to allow the set of noir (as a *defined* entity) to function "as if" it were closed. The crucial point of this section will be to understand that this does not constitute some "solution" to the open set, but another mode of ontology, a mode that represses the impossibility rather than turning it into a condition of possibility. The chapter will then carry the concept of the Lacanian Imaginary from the ontology to the historiography of film noir. This involves an engagement with Thomas Elsaesser's formulation of the "historical imaginary", as a process whereby the intricacies and inconsistencies of the history of film noir are replaced by a consistent and seemingly

impermeable discourse, which insists unproblematically that, for example, American film noir was the product of the influx of German émigrés to Hollywood that followed the rise to power of National Socialism. The repressive function of the historical imaginary will be compared to the Lacanian structure of the paternal metaphor, where a signifier is repressed by the intervention of the Name of the Father, and results in the imaginary discourse of phallic signification. Elsaesser's own attempt to rediscover the lost possibilities in the history of film noir will be considered in terms the relationship to the past theorised by psychoanalysis and the possibility of introducing there new possibilities as expressed by Bergson and Žižek. Finally, the emergence of necessity from contingency that attends the production of the historical imaginary will be shown to be a retroactive effect that reshapes the past in the image of the present; this will be discussed through Ginette Vincendeau's reading of Poetic Realism as "French Film Noir", and the transformation of the *point de capiton* into the master signifier in Lacanian theory.

Chapter 4 will draw together all of these strands to provide the culmination of this investigation of film noir and Lacan. Firstly, the theories of open and closed sets will be brought together to explore film noir endings. Seemingly neatly-concluding films such as *Gilda* that appear to offer a "closed" ending in fact suggest once again the impossibility of such closure, and the concept of suture will be employed to examine the way in which such narratives can appear to tie up loose ends and yet still leave a sense of unfinished business. Conversely, a film such as *Kiss Me Deadly*, which was exhibited for many years shorn of its final moments, presents the possibility of a radically *open* ending that quite literally explodes any possibility of closure. What then follows is an extended discussion of *The Maltese Falcon* that draws primarily upon the "as if" mode first identified in Chapter 3. Firstly, the Falcon statue itself is explored in terms of Lacan's use of the theory of imaginary numbers – as something that "does not exist" (it

is a fake) and yet has an effect (people die in search of it) – to suggest a way in which Lacan's much misunderstood deployment of the square root of minus one should be understood in terms of the imaginary function of signification. Following on from this, the chapter will explore the way in which the imaginary status of the Falcon allows the film narrative to construct certain "fictions" – understood in the sense as something treated *as if* it were true, or real – that point to a rapport between the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan and the philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. These sections are therefore particularly significant because they present the clearest example of the kind of dialectical relationship between film and theory that this project envisages. Like the *point de capiton*, the concept of fiction speaks to both the cinematic and filmic levels of noir; it grants insight into the functioning of the critical category and a key constituent film, while at the same time these subjects suggest new ways in which to understand Lacanian psychoanalysis. In its final, crucial move, this chapter will then turn to the development of film noir since the 1970s, and the emergence of contemporary permutations such as neo-noir. These versions of noir will be considered in terms of repetition and the manner in which they establish a relationship to their past. Furthermore, an understanding of the development of noir, and then neo-noir into a fully-fledged genre at both the critical and industrial levels will permit the introduction of a final distinction to the formulation of noir as *point de capiton*: in terms of the empty, master signifier and the noir genre as a network of knowledge that serves to fill out this signifier with positive content. Bringing theory and film, then, together for the last time, this project concludes with an investigation of the way in which the exploration of noir as genre can suggest a new understanding of the development of Lacanian psychoanalysis, while concomitantly presenting what should be considered a *Lacanian theory of genre*, which both illuminates and questions a concept and critical practice that is fundamental to any exploration of the cinema.

This project does not seek to add new films to the category of noir, to uncover lost B-features or recontextualise films not necessarily considered "noir". It does, however, seek to explore such processes of addition and inclusion in the constitution of the film noir canon and suggest the ways in which the noir list (or set) can be understood in Lacanian terms. The concluding section of the thesis will then provide a summation of these insights and aim to describe the new position this confluence of cinema and psychoanalysis leaves both the already well-explored field of film noir criticism as well as the once-flagging discipline of Lacanian film theory. This reinvigoration begins, in the following chapter, with a place and a time (France, 1946), a selection of films (from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Double Indemnity*) and a Lacanian concept (the *point de capiton*), and from here proceeds a thoroughgoing investigation of the discursive constructions of both the films and the criticism that come under the signifier "noir".

## Chapter 1. Film Noir as *Point de Capiton*: Retroactive Temporality and Symbolic Structure

Reading noir with Lacan can establish a structural corollary between the function of the signifier "noir" in film criticism and the retroactive function of the *point de capiton* as formulated in Lacan's theory of language. Furthermore, at a narrative level, the function of the *point de capiton* can also be found in the retroactive constructions of film noir flashbacks. Exploring such cinema, not as a signifying image but as a *meaningful structure*, it is therefore possible to say that a retroactive "noir temporality" is also the temporality of the Symbolic order. This chapter will explore the way in which the signifier "noir" enables the analysis of a certain type of Hollywood film from the 1940s and 1950s, and now stands in metonymically for an entire cinematic discourse, as well as the way in which a film noir such as *Double Indemnity* is thoroughly concerned with the retroactive production of knowledge through narrative structure. It will then go on to investigate the theoretical implications of such an engagement with the *point de capiton* as suggested by the specificities of films noirs such as *Gilda* and *The Killers* (1946).[1]

### 1. Noir and Retroactivity

As suggested in the Introduction to this study, it is a truism of film criticism that noir is a retroactive category. Indeed, retroaction can be seen to operate at every level in film noir. The conventional historiography of the category suggests that the term originated in French film criticism of 1946, in response to what appeared to be a new tendency emergent in the American cinema. The May 1946 Blum-Byrnes agreements – designed to help alleviate France's war-debt – ensured the distribution of Hollywood movies across the country, and so in the summer of that year films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941)

[1] *The Killers*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. USA, Universal Pictures, 1946.

and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) could finally make their way across the Atlantic.[2] It has become a critical commonplace to begin a discussion of noir with a vignette from this period. Raymond Durgnat and Paul Schrader – two of the first and most influential writers on noir in the Anglo-American tradition – begin their articles with variations on the same historical scene: cut off from Hollywood by the Occupation, liberated France welcomed a number of American crime films, made during or just after the war, in which the French critics discerned a certain 'darkening of tone,' a 'new mood of cynicism and pessimism' and for which they had an adjective, the appellation: "*noir*".[3]

The critic particularly identified by this historiography was Nino Frank. Writing in *L'Écran Français* in August 1946, Frank recognised amongst the new American releases a constellation of psychological crime movies – *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* (1944), and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) – that stood apart.[4] Three months later, Jean-Pierre Chartier reiterated this categorization in *Révue du Cinéma*, adding *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and the forthcoming *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) to a collection of what both critics described as "*noir*" films.[5] Frank's article, 'A New Kind of Police Drama: the Criminal Adventure', would appear to be the first use of this term in relation to the 1940s Hollywood cinema. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward go so far as to attribute 'the actual invention of the term "film noir",' formed by

[2] *Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941; *How Green Was My Valley*. Dir. John Ford. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1941.
[3] See respectively, Raymond Durgnat, 'Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir* (1970)', *FNR*, pp. 37-52 (p. 37), and Paul Schrader, 'Notes on *Film Noir* (1972)', *FNR*, pp. 53-65 (p. 53).
[4] *Laura*. Dir. Otto Preminger. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1944; *Murder, My Sweet*. Dir. Edward Dmytryk. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1944.
[5] Naremore suggests further expanding the initial group to include *The Woman in the Window* (1944), which was described at the time by Jacques Bourgeois in his article, '*La Tragédie policier*', *Révue du Cinéma*, 2 (1946), 70-72, as a 'bourgeois tragedy.' The film was, however, subsequently re-inscribed as a film noir; itself an instance of retroactive transformation (Naremore, *MTN*, p. 13). *The Lost Weekend*. Dir. Billy Wilder. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1945; *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Dir. Tay Garnett. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1946.

analogy with Marcel Duhamel's *Série Noire* paperbacks, to this work.[6] Frank celebrated a new class of American filmmakers – Wilder, Preminger, Chandler and Huston – who, during the war years, had come to supersede the old guard of Ford, Wyler and Capra, and whose dark and mysterious films had displaced the sentimentalism of their predecessors. Frank made a determined effort to name this class of films: 'criminal adventures or, better yet (...) criminal psychology.'[7] They were films defined by 'the dynamic of violent death,' that signalled the end of the classic detective film. No longer was the question "Whodunit?", rather, it was "How do they act?". The seminal term emerged where Frank noted, 'the "noir" films no longer have any common ground with run-of-the-mill police dramas.'[8] Although marked by inverted commas, "*noir*" appears to slip out almost incidentally, descriptively. It did, however, seem to be the apposite term.

Chartier's piece, 'Americans Are Also Making *Noir* Films', recognised the same dark qualities in the Hollywood cinema. Chartier asserted the essential similarity between *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, all of which could be represented by the first film's tag line: 'She kisses him so that he'll kill for her.'[9] Though instead of celebration, Chartier greeted the films with moral outrage; they were pessimistic, disgusted with humanity, and populated with venal characters: monsters, criminals and psychopaths. He puzzled at the censors who lifted the ban on such work, and dismissed 'talk of a French school of *film noir*' because films such as *Hôtel du Nord* (1938) and *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) 'contain some glimmer of

[6] Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3rd edn (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1992), p. 1n1. The *Série Noire* of course published translations of many of the literary sources of the classical American film noir.
[7] Nino Frank, 'A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure (1946)', trans. by Alain Silver, *FNR2*, pp. 15-19 (p. 15).
[8] Ibid., p. 18.
[9] Jean-Pierre Chartier, 'Americans Are Also Making *Noir* Films (1946)', trans. by Alain Silver, *FNR2*, pp. 21-23 (p. 21).

resistance to the dark side,' while the American films were totally *noir*.[10] Despite its moralist stance, Chartier's piece does contain some important insights into the emerging category; it identified the main culprits – Chandler and Wilder – who are collectively responsible for *Double Indemnity*'s adaptation, and widened the group to include Wilder's despairing 'other "noir" film' – *The Lost Weekend* – a title often overlooked in subsequent work on the category.[11] Chartier also echoed Frank's comments on the popularity of the first person narration, and discussed its implications in the various films.

Despite their diametrically opposed reactions to the films, Frank and Chartier were in agreement insofar as they both constituted a group of "American films noirs", that – although made at different times, by different filmmakers, and featuring different actors, plots and structures – all seemed to be pervaded by the same darkness, which was felt all the more keenly by critics in a country that had recently emerged from its own *années noires*. And so the first writings on the American film noir – that perennial of film criticism – appeared not in Hollywood, not in the industry or in the press, nor did it appear at the time or shortly after the release of the films involved. Rather it was in the French film journals of 1946 that the category was created ex post facto, at several years' and several thousand miles' distance.[12]

In 1955, two more French critics, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, revisited this first scene – the inception of the category – to construct their *Panorama of American Film Noir*. They noted that the summer of 1946 produced five films – *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Woman in the Window* – that had 'an unusual and cruel atmosphere in common, one tinted by a very

[10] Ibid., p. 23. *Hôtel du Nord*. Dir. Marcel Carné. France, Sédif Productions, 1938; *Le Quai des brumes*. Dir. Marcel Carné. France, Ciné-Alliance, 1938.
[11] Chartier, '*Noir* Films', p. 21.
[12] Retrospectively, of course, this intervention can be seen as more *in medias res*, arriving before classic film noir's "demise" in 1958.

particular eroticism.'[13] However, they argued that critics at the time did not realise the true impact of these films: Borde and Chaumeton credited Frank as one of the first to discuss "film noir" and identify its basic traits but suggested that he subordinated these criminal psychology films to the detective genre. It was not until the release the following year of films such as *This Gun for Hire*, *The Killers*, *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *The Lady in the Lake* (1947) that the French public were obliged to accept what Borde and Chaumeton called 'the idea of film noir.'[14] Through a synthesis of almost a decade's worth of French criticism on this new Hollywood cinema, they were able to gain an overview of the category as a whole (their *panorama*) and discern what appeared to be its essential qualities: the presence of crime, a feeling of alienation in the spectator, and five adjectives – 'oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent and cruel.'[15]

Borde and Chaumeton's was also therefore the first work to construct a history of the American film noir, tying it to a specific period in time: 1941 to 1953. Having defined the object of their study both in terms of its qualities and its time-frame, these critics were able to order a disparate collection of Hollywood films into a workable – if not entirely coherent – category, describe its formation and rise to prominence, and chart what they perceived to be its decline and diffusion into other cycles and genres. Noir was thus, according to Borde and Chaumeton, a short-lived series that inverted conventional Hollywood formulas, presenting flawed heroes, sympathetic villains, and vicious *femmes*, that peaked around the time that these films first found their way to France (1946-1948), and whose influence can be felt in a film as little noir as *The Band Wagon* (1953).[16] Further to their historiography, Borde and Chaumeton commented also on the process of criticism itself. They noted a necessary distance and time lag required for criticism to function, which explained why the "idea of noir" did not emerge for

[13] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 1.
[14] Ibid., p. 1. *The Lady in the Lake*. Dir. Robert Montgomery. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1947.
[15] Ibid., p. 2.
[16] *The Band Wagon*. Dir. Vincente Minelli. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953.

them until 1947 and why a film which at first seemed unclassifiable could later be understood as the first in a new series. Here again the process of retroaction is operative: in Borde and Chaumeton's schema, the films of 1947 determined those that had preceded them, solidifying them into the category "noir"; and the critics' project as a whole served to reinvest that first scene in 1946 and the French critical tradition that it engendered with a significance that is still recognised half a century later.[17]

More recently, and perhaps as a result of this significance, research on film noir has found it necessary to amend, even to rethink entirely this historiography. Ginette Vincendeau insists that it should be remembered that, 'noir is also a French word,' and that, despite Borde and Chaumeton's dismissal of the European influence on noir and their suggestion that the French cinema was largely unknown in Hollywood, masters of the American film noir such as Lang, Siodmak, Wilder and Tourneur were in fact *making* French films in the 1930s.[18] Vincendeau highlights the importance of French Poetic Realism to noir, noting that it is sometimes mentioned in passing as a source (for example by Schrader) but it is not explored in the literature as a significant antecedent. Furthermore, Vincendeau notes that Borde and Chaumeton recognise only in passing that many American noirs were in fact remakes of 1930s French films, or found original versions in France. For example, Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931) became Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Pépé le Moko* (1937) became *Casbah* (1948), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was in fact first adapted in 1939 as *Le Dernier Tournant*.[19] Charles O'Brien reiterates this insight and carries it further; he suggests that, rather than being a post-war coinage, the term "film noir" was in fact used by French film critics in a

[17] Borde and Chaumeton themselves retroactively modify their *Panorama* in the 1979 edition, adding *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) as the terminal point of their series and introducing a new group of "noir" films that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

[18] Ginette Vincendeau, 'Noir Is Also a French Word: The French Antecedents of Film Noir', in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. by Ian Alexander Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1994), pp. 49-58 (p. 49).

[19] *La Chienne*. Dir. Jean Renoir. USA, Les Établissements Braunberger-Richebé, 1931; *Scarlet Street*. Dir. Fritz Lang. USA, Fritz Lang Productions, 1945; *Pépé le Moko*. Dir. Julien Duvivier. France, Paris Film, 1937; *Casbah*. Dir. John Berry. USA, Marston Productions, 1948; *Le Dernier Tournant*. Dir. Pierre Chenal. USA, Gladiator Productions, 1939.

consistent manner – during the period immediately prior to the Second World War – in reference to poetic realist classics such as *La Bête humaine* (1939) and *Quai des brumes*.[20] In contradistinction then to Chartier – who had denied that these films had anything noir about them – and to Borde and Chaumeton – who disavowed the French films entirely and suggested that "French film noir" was a phenomenon of the mid-1950s – O'Brien and Vincendeau establish 1930s Poetic Realism not only as an important precursor to the American series (bridging the gap between 1920s German Expressionism and 1940s classical Hollywood cinema), but also, and more significantly, as the *original films noirs*. This omission in the standard historiography has meant that Poetic Realism can only now be understood in its vital relation to noir; it has retroactively found its place in the history of noir, and as a result the category has once again been rethought, reformulated after the fact.[21]

It would seem that every critic since Borde and Chaumeton has deemed it necessary to revise or refine, clarify or even deconstruct the category of noir. Work on the ontology of noir appears broadly to fall into two categories: the endeavour to define noir and the consideration of the relationship between noir and criticism itself. This first phase, the movement towards a definition of noir, takes up Borde and Chaumeton's founding gesture. Higham and Greenberg's 1968 chapter on 'Black Cinema' (a translation of "film noir" into the Anglo-American tradition) is credited as the first English-language work to explore the category and describes film noir as a fully-realised genre characterised by violence, greed, lust, ambition, and fear: a dark European flower blooming in Hollywood.[22] This notion of noir as genre was taken up by a variety of subsequent critics, such as James Damico and Foster Hirsch, who

[20] Charles O'Brien, 'Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation', *Iris*, 21 (1996), 7-20. *La Bête humaine*. Dir. Jean Renoir. France, Paris Film, 1939.
[21] The full import of Vincendeau and O'Brien's work and its relation to the conventional historiography of noir will be explored in chapters 2 and 3.
[22] Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd, 1968), pp. 19-35.

identified it in terms of specific narrative conventions and character types.[23] In opposition to these genre studies, noir is also defined in terms of motif and tone in a manner that renders it incomparable, Durgnat contends, with genres such as the Western; for him, noir is a bleak exploration of crime and punishment as old as *Oedipus Rex*.[24] Robert Porfirio concurs, suggesting that pessimism is the unifying trait of noir; he treats the films of the classical period almost in terms of a philosophical movement, a specifically American brand of existentialism distinct from its Continental counterpart.[25] Place and Peterson suggest that it is noir's visual style – low-key lighting, wide-angle lenses and bizarre compositions – that runs as a consistent thread through the films and thus defines them.[26] Schrader's work combines both these discourses, suggesting that it is *through* the distinctive visual style that noir expresses its dark tone, while delimiting the classical period from 1941 to 1958.[27]

Bordwell and Telotte emphasise the non-conformist or unconventional dimension of noir as its defining feature, but both critics also point towards the second movement in the study of noir when they suggest that a consideration of the category is as much a consideration of criticism itself as it is of any group of films.[28] This self-reflexive approach to noir is centred on the work of James Naremore, Thomas Elsaesser and Marc Vernet, who argue that film noir is the product of a critical rather than a filmmaking tradition. Naremore argues that its expansive and contradictory nature as a category suggests that noir can best be understood as a discursive construction, a body of films that writers have constituted retroactively in the classical Hollywood cinema.[29]

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[23] James Damico, '*Film Noir*: A Modest Proposal (1978)', *FNR*, pp. 95-105 (p. 101); Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), p. 72.
[24] Durgnat, 'Paint It Black', pp. 38, 37.
[25] Robert Porfirio, 'No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir* (1974)', *FNR*, pp. 77-93 (p. 80).
[26] Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, 'Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir* (1974)', *FNR*, pp. 65-75.
[27] Schrader, 'Notes'. Schrader's work as a filmmaker also contributes to another retroactive determination of film noir: the discourse of neo-noir posits own notion of the classical series, upon which is predicated a film such as *Taxi Driver* (1976). This movement will be explored in detail in Chapter 4.
[28] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p. 75; Telotte, *Voices*, p. 3.
[29] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 11.

Elsaesser insists that noir is an historical fantasy: a Germanic spectre conjured, in the first instance, by Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer.[30] Vernet goes further, stating that noir is an idea that can 'only be found in books,' and using the radical heterogeneity of the category to unfound its critical myths regarding expressionism and hard-boiled fiction, thereby deconstructs noir entirely.[31] There is then an argument to be made for the case that film noir exists most convincingly as the retroactive product of critical discourse. Hollywood had no single name for the broad range of films it produced in the 1940s and 1950s that have now come under the aegis of "noir"; it is a category that, it seems, did not appear in the Anglo-American tradition that produced it for another twenty years.[32] Borde and Chaumeton's *idea of noir* is thus one projected into the past, its every usage constituting a retroactive determination and reinvestment with meaning.

Interestingly, retroaction can also be found to operate within a number of the noir films themselves. To distinguish between this structure and that of the critical category, it will therefore be necessary, and instructive, to observe the distinction made by Gilbert Cohen-Séat between the filmic fact and the cinematic fact. In his *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma*, Cohen-Séat defines the former as the expression of life through 'a determined system of the combination of images,' which is to say, the films themselves. The latter, after Durkheim, is the cinema in its social dimension; it is the 'circulation in human groups of a resource of documentations, sensations, ideas, feelings, materials offered by life and given form by the film in its fashion,' which includes film criticism.[33] And so, having established that retroaction is operative at the cinematic level in noir, it can be added that it is also operative at the level of the filmic itself. In their narrative structures, noir films are often concerned, for

[30] Elsaesser, *WCA*, pp. 420-444.
[31] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 26.
[32] At the time, the Anglo-American tradition did of course have a very great number of names for their films and did in fact recognise certain tendencies within them, but lacked the organising principle of "noir". This will be explored in detail below, and in subsequent chapters.
[33] Gilbert Cohen-Séat, *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma* (Paris: PUF, 1946), p. 57.

instance, with the production of knowledge ex post facto. For example, the flashback narratives of films such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *D.O.A.*, and *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) present an opening scene – in each case a dead or dying man – whose meaning is determined only at the end of the film; the climactic revelations of *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Woman in the Window*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* effect a transformation of the entire proceedings, retroactively framing them and providing a previously unknown context; and other films noirs, such as *Out of the Past*, are characterised by overtly retrospective themes and preoccupations.[34]

[34] *Sunset Blvd.*. Dir. Billy Wilder. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1950. In light of the Lacanian structural linguistic theory below, in which both "filmic" and "cinematic" signifiers – in Cohen-Séat's sense of these terms – will be discussed, the relationship between the two could perhaps be understood by analogy with the structure denotation/connotation. The connotative units of one system form the denotative elements of a second system, and thus filmic signifiers such as the sound, image, performance, etc. of a film provide the basis for a critical analysis whose discourse produces a cinematic signifier such as "noir". (See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), and "myth" as the sign emerging from a secondary semiological chain (p. 119).)

## 2. Psychoanalysis and Retroactivity

Therefore, with the notion of a cinematic category formed after the fact and subject to subsequent, retroactive determination, made up in part by a group of films that depict or are structured by the retroactive production of knowledge, an intersection between the fields of film noir and psychoanalytic theory is suggested. An investigation of the structures of noir suggests that a comparison with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis – in which retroaction plays a fundamental role – can produce a new understanding of the formation and function of the category and its constituent films.[35]

An understanding of this potential intersection will require an exploration of temporality and causality as discussed in psychoanalytic theory. The starting point for any such discussion is Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which would translate literally into English as "afterwardsness".[36] The Standard Edition translates the term as "deferred action", a phrase that invites an interpretation of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* based on the idea of a linear determinism. This model of causality is based upon Freud's pre-psychoanalytic work, where the concept emerges in the context of the theory of seduction. The analysis of Emma's hysteria, discussed in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, presented a situation in which a childhood sexual trauma does not manifest itself as anxiety until the memory of this scene is evoked by a much later event. Freud commented that, in such cases of hysterical repression, '[w]e invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action*.'[37] This would seem to suggest that the infantile trauma leaves a trace, something deposited

[35] This is in contrast to Krutnik, *Lonely Street* or *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by Kaplan. The aim here is not to diminish or reject the wealth of gender-related work on noir, indeed considerations of structure and gender are as inseparable in film noir as they are in Lacanian theory; rather the aim is to take psychoanalytic enquiry in a new direction, carrying forth with it some of the valuable insights such work has granted. See, for example, Doane's discussion of *Gilda* below.

[36] See Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on Afterwardsness', trans. by John Fletcher, in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 260-265 (p. 263).

[37] Sigmund Freud, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology (1950 [1895])', ed. & trans. by James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. I (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 283-397 (p. 356), original emphasis.

in the individual, which is subject to an "incubation period" – the time lapse required for the psychic change involved in sexual maturation – and develops only when triggered by a second experience.[38] This is one sense of the German adjective *nachträglich* ("later" or "afterwards") and Freud's substantive noun *Nachträglichkeit*: a movement from past to future. Strachey's choice of "deferred" emphasises this forward-looking orientation. "Defer" suggests a delay between cause and effect: it comes from the Latin, *differre*, to postpone. This is an interpretation based on Freud's theory of the aetiology of psychoneuroses in the 1890s, where traumatic sexual experiences exert a pathogenic influence in the unconscious. These experiences are, in a sense, transmitted into the future, creating a predisposition towards pathology: they are 'the fundamental precondition for hysteria.'[39] Freud adds that such experiences 'create the hysterical symptoms, but (...) do not do so immediately, [they] remain without effect to begin with and only exercise a pathogenic action later, when they have been aroused after puberty in the form of unconscious memories.'[40] Childhood traumas thus operate by "deferred action". *Nachträglichkeit* therefore means that, as Freud and Breuer stated, 'hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.'[41] They suffer, in a sense, from the past.

*Nachträglichkeit*, however, cannot be reduced to this model of linear determinism. With Freud's move away from the theory of seduction to a theory of infantile sexuality, the concept loses its prominence in his work. A seemingly more nuanced version emerges in his later thought: a properly psychoanalytical theory of *Nachträglichkeit* based on the case of the Wolf Man and the dimension of retroactivity.[42] This case study presents a complex set of interrelated experiences and

[38] Laplanche compares this model to a time bomb (Laplanche, 'Notes', p. 261).
[39] Freud, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria (1896)', SE III, pp. 189-221 (p. 212).
[40] Ibid., p. 212.
[41] Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), SE II, p. 7.
[42] It should be noted that retroaction is in fact present in the early conception of *Nachträglichkeit*: despite Freud's letter to Fliess of 3rd October 1897, in which he insists upon progressive determination rather than retrogressive fantasy, his aetiology of psychoneuroses already contains a retroactive element. This is found in Freud's suggestion that, 'memory-traces [are] subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in

memories that result in a variety of debilitating symptoms. Freud's analysis focuses on an anxiety-dream recounted by the patient from the night before his fourth birthday in which he saw a group of wolves sitting in the tree outside his bedroom. After lengthy consideration, Freud concludes that the dream refers to a scene of parental coitus his patient must have witnessed at the age of one and a half. The scene itself had no significance for the child, but it was retained in the unconscious. It was not until two and half years later that, as a result of his patient's infantile sexual researches and excitations – which included what Freud considered to be a genuine seduction by an older sister – this "primal scene" was imbued with a sexual significance, thereby constituting it as traumatic. This gave rise to the pathogenic dream: the sole means through which the trauma could at the time be represented. Freud notes that it was only in analysis twenty years later that the Wolf Man could put 'the impressions and impulses of his fourth year into words which he would never have found at the time,' adding, '[t]his is simply another instance of *deferred action*.'[43] There are in fact multiple instances of *Nachträglichkeit* throughout the case: the first here being the retroactive determination of the memory of the primal scene later in childhood, the second the determination of both these impressions in adult life. The scene had no significance, no existence as trauma, until it was activated later; it was constituted as a trauma in this very movement of return and thus operated 'like a fresh event.'[44] *Nachträglichkeit* is implicated at every point in the Wolf Man's symptom formation; for example, his butterfly phobia revealed a childhood scene involving the maid that consisted of a threat of castration and an evocation of the primal scene, which was "innocent" at the time but retroactively determined as traumatic.

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accordance with fresh circumstances – to a retranscription,' and the potential to read his two-stage theory of trauma as the ex post facto determination, via memory, of the first scene by the second (Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1877-1904*, ed. & trans. by Jeffrey Masson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), pp. 270 & 207).

[43] Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (1918 [1914])', SE XVII, pp. 3-123 (p. 45n), original emphasis.

[44] Ibid., p. 109.

This complex set of interrelated elements substantiates Freud's notion of the overdetermined symptom, and ultimately demonstrates that his conception of *Nachträglichkeit* involves both retroactive and progressive dimensions. He states that his theory contains a 'part which, starting from reality, operates in a regressive direction' side by side with 'another influence which, starting from the impressions of childhood, operates in a forward direction.'[45] Indeed, Freud's insistence on *Nachträglichkeit* here – a retroactive understanding of the primal scene – depends upon an affirmation of the progressive determination that the scene as event engendered. However, having emphasised this retroactive dimension through the reconstructions of the Wolf Man's analysis, Freud acknowledges that his theory was open to the critique – expressed by Jung – that these 'forgotten experiences of childhood' could be the product of 'retrospective phantasying' in adult life rather than infantile trauma.[46] As a result, Freud agonises over the ontological status of the primal scene, revising, qualifying, and restating his conclusions throughout the case study. He goes back and forth, between stressing the progressive and regressive aspects of determination, in what Lee Edelman calls a 'Freudian Wolf-trot.'[47] Even considered as fantasy, Freud maintains that the primal scene must be the 'reproduction of a reality experienced by the child' because a fantasy can only be produced 'from material which has been acquired from some other source.'[48] He also insists that this material must have been acquired at an early age because the dream-symptom emerged not in later life but at the age of four. Freud does, however, begin to modify his considerations of what this "reality" could have been, suggesting that the scene could have been constituted by the sight of animal copulation displaced onto an "innocent" scene involving the parents. He concludes his

[45] Ibid., p. 54.
[46] Ibid., p. 103n.
[47] Lee Edelman, 'Seeing Things: Representations, the Scene of Surveillance, and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 93-116 (p. 100).
[48] Freud, SE XVII, p. 54.

discussion with a '*non liquet*,' a legal term meaning "it is not clear": in the case of the reality of the primal scene, the evidence is inconclusive.[49]

Whether or not it was a factual reality, the primal scene was, in Freud's view, a psychic reality for the Wolf Man that depended upon a retroactive movement, on Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit* as a relation to the past. This aspect of Freud's work was emphasised by the French psychoanalytic tradition. Translating the term as *après-coup* – like *nachträglich*, a common word, literally meaning an "after-blow" – French psychoanalysis highlights the retroactive dimension of the concept, thus avoiding the risk of reducing *Nachträglichkeit* to a linear "deferred action". This innovation was suggested by Loewenstein's translation of the Wolf Man case, but it is Lacan who is credited with recognising the importance of this element in Freud's work.[50] In his first Seminar, Lacan reflects upon the complexities of Freud's conception of temporality in the Wolf Man case and notes that it raises a fundamental question for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis: 'what value does the subject's reconstructed past have?'[51] With regard to trauma, the clinical evidence suggests that it is not its actuality as an event but its aspect as fantasy that is most important for the subject. Lacan recognises that no-one will ever know what the Wolf Man saw or did not see. It is only in retrospect that such things can be defined; the primal scene could only be reconstructed on the basis of its traumatic effect on the patient. The scene acquires this pathogenic dimension at the time of the dream, which Lacan likens to an 'imaginary break-in (...) – the *Prägung* of the originating traumatic event.'[52] This *Prägung*, or "striking" in the sense of imprinting a coin, is brought about by the retroactive effect of the child's integration into the field of symbolic significations. It is only once the child

[49] Ibid., p. 60.
[50] Indeed, Lacan himself claims the honour in 'Position of the Unconscious', reminding his reader that he was 'the first to extract [*Nachträglichkeit*] from Freud's texts' ('Position of the Unconscious', in *Écrits*, pp. 703-721 (p. 711)).
[51] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. by John Forrester, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1991), p. 13.
[52] Ibid., p. 190.

is able to integrate his experiences into the law of the Symbolic that the primal scene can emerge as the symbol of the dream and take on its status as trauma. As trauma, however, it must be detached from the subject; it is no longer integrated but repressed 'after the fact [*après-coup*], *nachträglich*,' forming the nucleus around which his symptoms will form.[53]

Lacan's conception of *après-coup* ensures that psychoanalysis cannot be reduced simply to a question of the linear determination of the subject's history, or even an inverted determinism where the future determines the past; rather it emphasises the dialectical relationship between the two directions. That Freud used the same term, *Nachträglichkeit*, to refer to both the progressive and regressive movements in his theory suggests that there is no clear demarcation between them, that they are in fact interdependent. It is a theory of the relation between past, present and future. For the subject the past is always implicated in the present, and the future in the past. An element in the past must wait to be understood, to find its meaning in the future, and so in the present the past becomes what it will always have been. Deferred action and *après-coup*, these are the two vectors of *Nachträglichkeit*. And already this suggests a certain corollary between the constitution of film noir and psychoanalytic theory. As a category constituted ex post facto, noir is indeed subject to similar structures as those identified by Freud. As observed in the Introduction, this connection has not gone unnoticed; for example, both Naremore and Elsaesser identify an element of *Nachträglichkeit* in the understanding of film noir. However, the possibilities of such a connection are as yet unrealised. It will be the aim of the investigation below to explore fully this convergence of film and theory.

Returning then briefly to psychoanalysis, Laplanche – while acknowledging his contribution to the understanding of *Nachträglichkeit* – suggests that Lacan's insights

[53] Ibid., p. 191.

are ‘precise but restricted’ and that it was his own work with Pontalis that drew attention to the concept’s general importance.[54] This is not so. The operation of *après-coup* can be found throughout Lacan’s work. While Freud limited *Nachträglichkeit* to the field of sexuality and trauma, Lacan’s work shows that human experience, particularly in its linguistic dimension, is always inscribed in this non-linear temporality. Lacan insists that, ‘[h]istory is not the past. History is the past insofar as it is historicised in the present.’[55] The subject exists *après-coup* for Lacan. The Wolf Man shows that the subject’s entry into the Symbolic order is an act of historicisation; it makes the subject capable of history. As Malcolm Bowie notes, ‘[t]he principle of *Nachträglichkeit*, on the basis of which Freud has scanned and interconnected the widely separated epochs of the patient’s emotional history, now reappears inside every moment of human time.’[56] Lacan’s theory of retroaction thus depends upon the structure of language.

[54] Laplanche, ‘Notes’, p. 260.
[55] Lacan, *S1*, p. 12.
[56] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p. 189.

### 3. The *Point de Capiton*

The Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* establishes a connection between two events, the latter producing the (traumatic) meaning of the former: indeed, the relation between the events could be considered a *relation of meaning*. For Lacan, meaning as such is a retroactive effect; he takes the example of the structure of a sentence and its punctuation to explain this notion. Lacan's theory and practice are predicated upon concepts of punctuation. In 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language', he discusses the analyst's practice of interrupting or terminating the session, which is experienced by the analysand as a "punctuation". Lacan compares this to the necessity of punctuation in a text: its lack in ancient manuscripts of the Bible, for example, is the source of their ambiguity. It is only once punctuation has been inserted that meaning is established.[57] Further to this, Lacan repeats throughout his work that meaning is in fact the retroactive effect of this punctuation, that, taking an example from concrete language,'[t]he sentence only exists as completed and its sense comes to it retroactively.'[58] Before its terminal point – its "punctuation" – the sentence is simply a chain of discourse; it only comes into being as it is finished, at the moment of its full stop. Prior to this, the meaning of the sentence is indeterminate; with its punctuation, the sentence's meaning is sealed in a movement from end to beginning. The final point confers meaning retroactively on the elements that preceded it. Before punctuation there is only the possibility of meaning; the first word in a sentence is dependent upon the arrival of the

[57] This type of punctuation – the clinical practice of "scansion" – should, however, be differentiated from the concept of punctuation here examined. Lacan's infamous "variable length sessions" made the temporal experience of the clinic itself meaningful. Interrupting the analysand's discourse interferes with his or her attempt to maintain self-consistency. Interjecting with a noise, a repeated word, or indeed the ending of the session itself leaves the analysand to reflect upon this act, to ponder it as "meaningful" and to constitute its meaning themselves ex post facto. The analyst does not impose a determinate meaning; they are not the Other *qua* locus of meaning. The analyst's strategy is to introduce a signifier, a possibility of meaning. The punctuating full stop of the sentence, however, *does* produce a determinate meaning; in a sense it closes off the possibility of meaning, it fixes meaning. This could be considered the "signification of the Other", the meaning determined by the structure of language, which will be explored below (See Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits*, pp. 197-268 (p. 258)).

[58] Lacan, *S3*, pp. 262-263.

"last word" (in the sense of "to have the last word on the matter"). Meaning is thus not a linear progression, an unfolding from start to finish. The sentence does not immanently *transmit* its meaning; its construction is inscribed in (the possibility of) meaning. The sentence can only be understood once meaning has been superimposed on it after the fact, endorsed by the intervention of a punctuating mark. Meaning is initially lacking; it is produced as an effect *après-coup*. It could thus be considered an historical product; it is the introduction of a context ex post facto that frames what preceded it and constitutes it as a whole.[59]

To formalise this notion of retroaction, Lacan introduces the concept of the '*point de capiton*' (a type of upholsterer's stitch that holds a button in place). [60] It is a theorisation of the relation between the signifier and the signified: Lacan's nuanced understanding of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* translated through a rethinking of the structural linguistic theory of Saussure and Jakobson. Taking the example of speech, Saussure conceived of signifieds and signifiers as two parallel sequences, with the conceptual 'plane of vague, amorphous thought' (signified) above the 'featureless plane of sound,' or the acoustic-image (signifier).[61] Language was thus a linear temporal progression with no clearly marked divisions, the signifier flowing along with the progress of the signified. Demarcation depended upon the attribution of meaning to each segment, which can separate one linguistic unit from another. For Saussure, this delimitation required that the divisions established in the sound sequence match the divisions in the sequence of concepts, and vice versa; the signifier and signified were therefore established in the one-to-one, bi-univocal relation of the linguistic sign. This was Saussure's famous image of the sheet of paper: to cut the thought is to cut the sound. Signifier and signified are inseparable, interdependent components. The sign was

[59] See chapters 2 and 3 on the construction of the "whole" and the "all".
[60] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267.
[61] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 110.

structured by this "cut" in the two parallel planes, and the overall meaning of a sentence would equal the sum of meanings of each of its signs: meaning = (s1 and S1) + (s2 and S2) + (s3 and S3). Furthermore, the sign – while delimited – cannot be isolated from the language system as a whole because an individual signifier can in fact have several signifieds – homonymy means that "suit", "suit" and "suit" are all written and pronounced the same but signify a legal proceeding, a set of clothes, and "to be in accord" respectively. And several signifiers can have one signified: to match and to fit both correspond to the concept of "suiting". Saussure concluded that the meaning of a sign – and thus its delimitation – was determined by its value, its differential relation to all other signs. Like the pieces on a chess board, signs derived their specific linguistic value from their positions relative to all other signs: match, fit, and suit have shades of meaning that depend upon not only their differences from each other, but from all other linguistic units.[62] The sign could therefore be considered a function of its context.

Lacan takes up this formulation with his characteristic revisionism. Following Lévi-Strauss, Lacan tacitly inverts the Saussurean sign to suggest that the signifier logically precedes the signified.[63] He notes that while signifiers can insist through history, their signifieds change over time; these shifts in meaning 'prove that no one-to-one correspondence between the two systems can be established.'[64] Signifiers can thus be considered autonomous in their relation to signifieds; there is no mutuality between them, they are no longer bi-univocal. Lacan retains Saussure's notion of language as a system of differential elements, except – in accordance with his assertion of the primacy of the signifier over the signified – it is the signifier rather than the sign that constitutes these units. He takes the example of two doors, one with the word "Gentlemen" above it, the other "Ladies", and notes that the abstract concept of 'urinary segregation' does

[62] See Saussure, *General Course*, p. 88.
[63] For this primacy of the signifier, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. by Felicity Baker (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 37.
[64] Lacan, *S3*, p. 119. Signified and meaning are here thought to be synonymous.

not reside in either one of the doors alone but is precipitated by their juxtaposition.[65] Lacan's reversal of Saussure therefore suggests that the signified is *caused* by the signifier, or, more accurately, the conceptual plane of language is a product of the interrelation between signifiers. The signifier does not represent the signified: their relationship 'always appears fluid, always ready to come undone.'[66] The unity of Saussure's sign is therefore broken down by Lacan. Lacan thus finds Saussure's diagram of the signified and signifier as two planes progressing in parallel questionable; instead of 'one flux that is meaning and another that is discourse,' he conceives of language as a linear chain of signifiers that retroactively gives rise to signifieds.[67]

He states that clinical experience has shown that language cannot be considered as a sequence of successive, delimited elementary units and that these units as a result do not generate meaning progressively; there is instead an 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier,' an indeterminacy, an uncertainty of meaning.[68] It is here that Lacan finds it necessary to introduce the notion of the *point de capiton*; it is the caesura, the full stop that turns the chain of discourse into a sentence. As a function of language, the *point de capiton* has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions: the synchronic aspect is its punctuation of discourse, the terminal point that brings the sentence into existence, and the resultant retroactive production of meaning is its diachronic, albeit retrogressive, aspect. He rejects Saussure's 'correspondence between these two flows that would segment them' in favour of the retroactive effect of the punctuation mark, which temporarily halts the slippage of the signified by tying down its meaning like an upholsterer's button.[69] This process, through which the signifier

[65] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 417.
[66] Lacan, *S3*, p. 261.
[67] Ibid., p. 119.
[68] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 419.
[69] Lacan, *S3*, p. 262. This is not an "anchoring" but a "knotting" of signifiers: see the discussion in Chapter 4 of Lacan's comments on this matter.

meets, or more accurately *produces*, the signified Lacan calls "signification".[70] At this point, the signifier and the signified can be considered as being momentarily "sewn" together; the indeterminacy of the signifying chain is suddenly narrowed by the punctuating *point de capiton*. It does not, however, *consist* at any particular point of the chain, rather it *insists* in or along the chain as a result of the action of the *point de capiton*; Lacan shows that meaning cannot be isolated in a single element. Just as the meaning of the Wolf Man's trauma is constituted in the movement of return to the primal scene, meaning is not crystallised in the *point de capiton* itself but is produced as a function of its synchronic intervention in the diachronic chain of signifiers.[71] And just as the Wolf Man's return to the traumatic scene constitutes it *qua* trauma after the fact; as Žižek observes, 'meaning is not revealed, excavated from the hidden depth of the past' but constructed ex post facto.[72]

In place of Saussure's image of the parallel planes of thought and sound, Lacan diagrams the relation between signifiers and signified in what he calls the 'elementary cell' of the Graph of Desire.[73] The diachronous chain of signifiers is conceived of as a progressive vector intersected by the thread of the meaning-making process, the retrogressive vector of the *point de capiton* that produces the signified. Lacan evokes this effect of meaning, stating that 'only in this latter vector does one see the fish it hooks.'[74] The double intersection of the vector $\underset{S.S'}{\longrightarrow}$ in Lacan's diagram reflects the nature of retroaction and shows that the effect of the *point de capiton qua* punctuating

[70] 'The signifier doesn't just provide an envelope, a receptacle for meaning. It polarizes it, structures it, brings it into existence' (ibid., p. 260). This is the synchronic structure of the *point de capiton*, which Lacan states is the structure of metaphor. See below.
[71] There is a point, however, in 'Position of the Unconscious', where Lacan seems to suggest a distinction between the retroactive effect of meaning and the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*: the latter he insists 'reveals a temporal structure of a higher order.' It is not entirely clear from the text whether Lacan is indeed drawing an explicit comparison between the two concepts ("higher" than what?), but this statement would seem to point to the necessity of distinguishing between the structure of language and the structure of the unconscious. This is discussed further below (Lacan, 'Position', p. 711).
[72] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 56.
[73] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 681. See Appendix 1.
[74] Ibid., p. 682.

mark should be considered the action of the structure of the signifying chain.[75] The *point de capiton* is thus a relation *between signifiers* as well as between signifier and signified. It should be remembered that signifiers exists as differential units in the system of language and are therefore never isolatable. The two intersections of the chain of signifiers Lacan designates *s*(A) and (A): the former is the signification of the Other (*Autre*), the instance that meaning is produced as an effect of the *point de capiton*; the latter is the big Other (*Autre*), the structure of the Symbolic order as a synchronous whole – the locus of the Law in which the articulation of the signifying chain is inscribed – it is the structural relation of the differential elements in the system of language.[76] Each signifier in a chain necessarily refers to all other signifiers and so *anticipates* the arrival of its final signifier, the *point de capiton*; the chain of signifiers 'always anticipates meaning by deploying its dimension in some sense before it.'[77] Lacan takes the example of phrases such as "The fact remains..." that insist upon their completion by certain other signifiers. This "anticipation" is expressed in Lacan's *écrit* on 'Logical Time'; it is, by extension, the assertion of 'anticipated certainty' that the *point de capiton* will complete it and retroactively determine what has preceded it.[78] The signifying chain functions because it presupposes its completion at a later point. Freud's bi-directional *Nachträglichkeit* is thus translated into the Graph of Desire and these dual vectors of anticipation and retroaction.

Furthermore, this diagram of the structure of signification can be understood in terms of Lacan's appropriation of Jakobson's categories of metonymy and metaphor,

[75] The name of this action is signification.
[76] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 682. The signifying chain is therefore inscribed in the possibility of meaning.
[77] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 419.
[78] Lacan, 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty', in *Écrits*, pp. 161-185 (p. 171). The context in the text is a little different; it is the assertion that a conclusion made in haste will retroactively be determined as correct that Lacan expresses through his sophism. Nevertheless, in terms of a structural relation between two points, an "anticipated certainty" of the signifier would seem valid. See below, on "$S_1$...".

the two axes of language.[79] Metonymy corresponds to the horizontal axis of language, the linear progression of the diachronic chain of signifiers (the vector $\underset{S.S'}{\longrightarrow}$ in the Graph). Lacan expresses metonymy with the following equation:

$$f(S \ldots S')\, S \cong S\,(-)\, s$$

Metonymic structure is 'the signifier-to-signifier connection' whose function is the slippage of the signified beneath it.[80] This equation suggests that metonymy is congruent with the maintenance of the bar – conceived of as the resistance to signification – between the signifier and signified; meaning is not produced, it is perpetually deferred along the chain. As Lacan states, 'it is in the relation of a signifier to another signifier that a certain relation *signifier over signified* will be generated [*c'est dans le rapport d'un signifiant à un signifiant, que va s'engendrer un certain rapport* signifiant sur signifié].'[81] Metonymy is therefore the precondition of metaphor; it is the coordination of signifiers in this way that allows for the intervention of the *point de capiton* and its metaphoric effect.[82]

Metaphor corresponds to the point at which the synchronic intervention of the *point de capiton* intersects with the chain of signifiers, *s*(A). It is the punctuating point

[79] See Roman Jakobson, 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 56-60. In this light, there is an interesting etymological subtlety to Strachey's "deferred action"; it also contains a sense of the Latin *ferre*, "to carry", and by extension the Greek *pherein* – from whence comes "metaphor" and so, "to carry meaning across". Where Lacanian theory finds the structure of metaphor in Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, it does therefore echo in Strachey's formulation, a formulation that would otherwise stand in opposition to it.

[80] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 429.

[81] Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1998), p. 33.

[82] It is necessary here to make a distinction between the structure of language that Lacanian theory suggests and Lacan's formulation that "the unconscious is structured like a language". This does not mean that the unconscious is structured *by* language; instead, it means that its structures can be compared to those identified in Lacan's reading of structural linguistics. The aim of this project is not to reiterate or expand upon Lacan's topography of the unconscious; rather it is to explore the possibilities of a Lacanian theory of the signifying chain. The elementary cell is a diagram of its structure; it is of the Imaginary order of language, at the level of what Lacan designates the *énoncé* or statement. Lacanian clinical practice works against this level of language, seeking to reach the upper level of the graph, which is associated with the unconscious and the position of *énonciation*. (For example, for an interesting discussion of the notion of unconscious, vertical metonymy see Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 50-54).

'in which signification ends as a finished product.'[83] Temporal rather than spatial, Lacan insists, it is the moment in which the meaning of the chain is retroactively determined. It is, however, elaborated in terms of the 'spatializing device' which Lacan uses to theorise this vertical axis of language.[84] Metaphor is the process by which meaning enters the world.[85] Following Jakobson, the Lacanian structure of metaphor is dependent upon a process of substitution: one signifier is substituted for another. This substituted signifier, however, is not erased; it is contained within the metaphor as an unspoken element. It is in this sense "repressed": latent in the metaphor but always evoked by its structure because repression, it should be remembered, always entails the return of the repressed.[86] Lacan symbolises the metaphoric structure thus:

$$f\left(\frac{\mathrm{S}'}{\mathrm{S}}\right) \mathrm{S} \cong \mathrm{S}\,(+)\,\mathrm{s}$$

The left side of the equation refers to the signifying function of this substitution; the right-hand portion suggests that this function is congruent with the movement of the signifier across the bar, which produces the signified. Conceived in these spatial terms, the *point de capiton qua* metaphor is this point at which the signifier crosses the bar that separates it from the signified. Lacan states that it is 'the passage of the signifier into the signified' – the latter, it should be remembered, being merely a *function* of the former – and this passage is thus the *production* of the signified. This is the movement of signification and therefore the moment of the production of meaning.[87]

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[83] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 682.
[84] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267.
[85] The full import of this suggestion, i.e. the function of the *point de capiton* in the metaphoric structure of the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and the ensuing "phallic signification", will be explored in Chapter 3.
[86] Miller suggests that the production of meaning is 'constituted (...) as a repression' (Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)', trans. by Jacqueline Rose, *Screen*, 18, no. 4 (1977), 24-34 (p. 25)). The bar between S and s, however, should not be interpreted as the barrier between unconscious and preconscious (Cf. Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, 'The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study', trans. by Patrick Coleman, *Yale French Studies*, no. 48 (1972), 118-175).
[87] This back and forth between temporal and spatial evocations suggests the complex interdependence of conceptions of spatiality and temporality produced in metaphor. Indeed, Guy Deutscher's book *The Unfolding of Language* (New York: Metropolitan, 2005) suggests that, as an abstract concept, time can

Further to the notion of repression in metaphor, Lacan nuances his conception of the *point de capiton* by adding that the signifying chain sustains 'as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units (...) all attested contexts that are, so to speak, "vertically" linked up to that point.'[88] Lacan suggests that the possible contexts of each signifier are aligned "above" them as if on the staves of a musical score.[89] The weight of these possibilities renders the chain indeterminate; it can be understood in many different ways, until the intervention of the *point de capiton* closes it off with a punctuation mark. This does not, however, reduce the sentence to a single, indisputable meaning because each of the contexts of the signifier are retained in the signifying chain as its repressed. Poetry, as Lacan notes, plays with these connotative possibilities in opposition to meaning. To establish a meaning – any meaning – the *point de capiton* must intervene and thereby allow discourse to function.[90]

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only be expressed through metaphors of space – that metaphors, in a sense, *construct* time. (See also the reference to the Hegelian '*Punkt*' in Chapter 4.)

[88] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 419.

[89] Ibid., p. 419.

[90] This implies a radical contingency inherent to the progression of the signifying chain, an idea which will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

## 4. The Noir Category and the *Point de Capiton*

With the idea that a retroactive movement is required to grasp meaning, as suggested by Lacan's theory of the *point de capiton*, the formation of noir can now be approached and Marc Vernet's suggestion that, 'the Americans made it, and then the French invented it,' can now be understood.[91] The French term "*film noir*" was (practically) unknown in the US during the 1940s and 1950s.[92] It would be tempting to compare the movies and the surrounding discourse of the classical period to Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet*; he was, as Borde and Chaumeton note, 'involved in events whose meaning he is *absolutely* unaware of.'[93] Indeed, it is only at the end of the film that their significance is revealed by Velma and the meaning of his actions retroactively conferred. There was, however, some recognition of certain tendencies within the Hollywood productions of the 1940s. This recognition did not always accord with the category of noir: Naremore notes that American critics compared *The Maltese Falcon* to Hitchcock's British thrillers of the 1930s, and furthermore, that Billy Wilder suggested that with *Double Indemnity* he intended to 'out-Hitchcock Hitchcock.'[94] At its release, *Gilda* was presented as a 'romantic melodrama,' and films like it the industry designated as 'Detective-Mystery Melodramas,' 'Social Problem Crime Films' and 'Psychological Dramas.'[95] Hollywood, it seemed, lacked an organising principle for the array of films now understood as noir. The American critical tradition produced myriad descriptors for the films then emerging. In a single article, Lloyd Shearer described films noirs such as *The Big Sleep* and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) as 'homicidal films,'

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[91] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 1.

[92] For example, in the documentary *The RKO Story* (UK/USA, BBC/RKO Pictures, 1987), Edward Dmytryk professes to have been unaware of the term "film noir"; furthermore, perusal of the archives of *The New York Times*, *The LA Times* and *The Washington Post* show that "film noir" was not employed until the 1970s. The noir archives will be explored in further detail in the next chapter. Interestingly, however, Robert Aldrich is pictured on the set of his film *Attack!* (1956) holding a copy of Borde & Chaumeton's *Panorama* in the original French. This will also be discussed in Chapter 2.

[93] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 40.

[94] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 15.

[95] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 2; Richard Maltby, 'The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *MBFN*, pp. 39-48 (p. 39).

'lusty, hard-boiled, gut-and-gore crime stories,' 'movie murder,' and 'hard-boiled crime pictures.'[96] *The New Yorker* described *Double Indemnity* as 'murder melodrama,' the *LA Times* described it as an 'intellectual exercise in crime;' *Newsweek* designated *Murder, My Sweet* a 'brass-knuckled thriller;' and the *Hollywood Reporter* commented upon the 'hard-boiled, kick-em-in the teeth murder cycle' in which Paramount Pictures had invested.[97] Durgnat notes that 'the English spoke only of 'the "tough, cynical Hammet-Chandler thriller".'[98] Moreover, Siegfried Kracauer coined a new term – 'Hollywood's terror films' – in an article which rehearsed the argument put forward in *From Caligari to Hitler*, that films such as *Somewhere in the Night* (1946) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) reflected an American state of mind.[99] While pre-empting the French critics by some months, it seems that this term lacked a certain resonance – which could be provided by the suturing power of the *point de capiton* "noir" – to endure, to serve as a nodal point for discourse.

It was only with the distance that history had afforded them that Frank and Chartier could look back at the American cinema of the early 1940s and affix a signifier to what they saw. The French critics conferred upon this proliferation of American signifiers the signification "*noir*", thereby connecting a disparate collection of films – such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Lost Weekend* – in a signifying chain and suggesting the possibility of their analysis in a systematic way. They provided the punctuation necessary to discern the meaning of this chain, in an instance of what Lacan calls 'the transmutation of the situation through the intervention of the signifier.'[100] This French signifier therefore intervened as a *point de capiton*, retroactively conferring a

[96] Lloyd Shearer, 'Crime Certainly Pays on the Screen (1945)', *FNR2*, pp. 9-14 (pp. 9-10). *The Blue Dahlia*. Dir. George Marshall. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1946.
[97] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 17.
[98] Durgnat, 'Paint It Black', p. 37.
[99] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?', *Commentary*, 2, no. 2 (1945), 132-136 (p. 132). *Somewhere in the Night*. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1946; *Shadow of a Doubt*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. USA, Universal Pictures, 1943.
[100] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267.

meaning onto a group of films that they did not originally bear. And so, while it seemed that a certain tendency in the American cinema had been discerned before Frank and Chartier gave it a name (the signifier *noir*), it is the very fact that they *did* give it a name that conferred upon this tendency its significance. For Lacan, the *point de capiton* is the 'point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate' and so the effect of Frank and Chartier's punctuation could be considered as the constitution of a locus around which a critical discourse on a certain kind of Hollywood film from the 1940s would be allowed to function.[101] Here the signifier "noir" is 'the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated.'[102] Furthermore, put into the context of the corollary between noir and Lacanian structural linguistics here suggested, Naremore's observation that 'French writers (...) were fascinated by the noir metaphor' gains a new resonance.[103] The action of their critical *point de capiton* in fact constituted the "noir metaphor". Frank and Chartier's works instantiate the structure of signification, the production of meaning conferred upon the group of American films in their application of the signifier "noir".

The discourse to which Frank and Chartier gave rise then resulted, in the 1950s, in the *Panorama of American Film Noir*. This impressionistic study of noir constitutes the category as a body with vague boundaries. The *Panorama* lists twenty-one "core" titles under the heading 'Film noirs,' which include such classics as the *The Maltese Falcon*, *Gilda* and *The Big Sleep*. The listing process is, however, somewhat unorthodox in light of the modern understanding of noir. Following this central category are a number of related categories, such as 'Criminal psychology' and 'Gangsters' that encompass quintessential films noirs such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Killers*, but also

[101] Ibid., p. 267.
[102] Ibid., p. 268.
[103] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 17.

less obvious titles such as *The Lost Weekend* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941).[104] Their method suggests that Borde and Chaumeton constituted noir through a process of discursive construction, which Naremore describes in terms of a Wittgensteinian notion of a loose network of "family resemblances" that establish a relation from one object to the next. He suggests that critical categories are formed through imaginative forms of metaphoric and metonymic association that constitute 'networks of relationship,' establishing a corpus characterised by 'complex radial structures, with vague boundaries and a core of influential members at the centre.'[105] To account for the relation between this category and the signifier "noir", Naremore invokes Foucault; he suggests that 'the Name of the Genre (...) functions in the same way as the Name of the Author.'[106] Foucault's author function is, Naremore notes, a means of textual classification that establishes and articulates a discourse; the genre function is then, by extension, the articulation of a cinematic discourse. Naremore's project, however, is not a theoretical one; this notion of the "genre function" is richly suggestive and deserves further exploration in its own right, but is not opened up to a sustained theorisation of the structure of noir as a cinematic category. In fact, Naremore's account of noir is in tacit accord with the function of the *point de capiton*; furthermore, the latter can illuminate the inconsistency of the category that Naremore identifies.[107]

He suggests that the establishment of the network of relations from one film object to the next can be considered as a form of chaining. This process is operative in Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama*: they note that *The Woman in the Window* is 'related to the noir series in its chiaroscuro technique' and *The Big Sleep* by its 'sordid and bizarre details' but these features do not necessarily relate to all the other films in

[104] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, pp. 161-3. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dir. Victor Fleming. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1941.
[105] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 5.
[106] Ibid., p. 11.
[107] The normative function of the noir category, which Naremore suggests in his Foucauldian aside, will be explored in terms of the Imaginary in Chapters 3 and 4.

the chain.[108] For example, both films are indeed "sordid" but the latter is characterised less by a low-key aesthetic than the low contrast, studio-bound look, and both films feature a femme fatale, but only the latter a private detective. Films noirs are related by such localised similarities rather than a single feature. Naremore recognises this when he notes that, '[c]ertain items (...) will be connected in different ways and will be utterly unlike others.'[109] It is clear therefore that Borde and Chaumeton's films noirs are not grouped together solely by virtue of their overt similarities but rather through a more abstract process of association comparable to that which Naremore describes. He notes that individual films – such as *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) – have little or nothing specifically in common, 'even though both movies have been called noir.'[110] The category as a whole thus appears radically heterogeneous and Naremore concludes therefore, that '[u]nfortunately, nothing links together all the things described as noir.'[111] However, in the context of the Lacanian *point de capiton*, it should be added that there is nothing that links them all *except* the signifier "noir". The process of constituting the category in this manner can only function underneath the signifier noir; the consistency of the chain that criticism produces depends upon the intervention of the signification "noir". Borde and Chaumeton in fact suggest this structure when they state that the object of their study 'will be evoked first (...) by referring to productions the critics have most often deemed to the "film noirs".'[112] For Borde and Chaumeton, as for Lacan, the signifier dominates; their discourse is determined by the signifier "noir", which functions as a *point de capiton*. "Noir" unifies the field of films under consideration, making them part of a structured network of cinematic meaning.[113] This construction can be understood as an instance of the Lacanian play upon

[108] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, pp. 45, 56.
[109] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 6.
[110] Ibid., p. 6. *The Shanghai Gesture*. Dir. Josef von Sternberg. USA, Arnold Productions Inc., 1941; *The Asphalt Jungle*. Dir. John Huston, USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1950.
[111] Ibid., p. 10.
[112] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 3.
[113] See Žižek, *SOI*, p. 87.

"insistence": the Latin *insistere* meaning "to stand upon", and so the signifier "stands upon" the category, determining it. This insistence is not limited to the category alone. Borde and Chaumeton suggest that it can in fact determine a filmmaker's entire oeuvre: '[t]he insurgents in John Huston's *We Were Strangers* [(1949)] are part and parcel of a career that, from *The Maltese Falcon* to *The Asphalt Jungle*, is situated under the sign of noir or noirified film.'[114] Everything in the *Panorama* must come under this signifier "noir".

Steve Neale suggests that, 'as a concept *film noir* seeks to homogenize a set of distinct and heterogeneous phenomena; it thus inevitably generates contradictions, exceptions and anomalies and is doomed, in the end, to incoherence.'[115] Film noir does indeed appear an inconsistent grouping, and yet it persists as a critical category. Here Bruce Fink's commentary on repetition and Heraclitus – who of course suggested that it is not possible to step in the same river twice because the waters keep on flowing – is illuminating. On one level Heraclitus is very obviously right that it is always changing, but it nonetheless remains the "same" river. There is repetition because there is a signifier. Although Bruce Fink explains that, 'repetition seems to be something of a misnomer, consisting in the return, not of the same, but of the different—the return of something else, something other' because the very word "twice" indicates that something is different: it may be the same object or the same place but *time* has intervened so they are at the very least *chronologically* different.[116] Like the waters, noir seems ever-changing, made different with each film, but the category nonetheless remains the same.

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[114] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 116. *We Were Strangers*. Dir. John Huston. USA, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1949.

[115] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 154. These "exceptions and anomalies" will be explored in the next chapter.

[116] Fink, 'The Real Cause of Repetition', in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 223-229 (p. 223).

What allows these things to be considered the same is that they occur beneath the same signifier: in the current case, "noir". The reason both *Stranger on the Third Floor* and *Gilda*, for example, can be considered in some respect the same, despite their manifest differences, is because they both appear in relation to the same signifier.[117] Again, Fink is here instructive:

> Heterogeneous things may be equated because one signifier covers all of them. At this level, repetition thus implies the "return" of something that would be different the second time but for the signifier. You can only step in the same river twice because you have a word or name for it – the "Swanee River," for example.[118]

The concept of "noir" returns with every film to which the signifier is attached, and a commonality is established between them. The only way in which identity can be attributed is on the basis of such attachment of a signifier to two different phenomena or things. This is not, it should be noted, the Lacanian notion of repetition proper – which bears upon the Real and will be explored briefly in relation to tuché and automaton in Chapter 2 – instead, Fink offers the term "substitution" to refer to this common usage of "repetition" as a process occurring under the signifier. Substitution, he states, 'establishes an equivalence between things that are not identical:' it is a case of "return with difference" that establishes connections between disparate things.[119] Each film noir is thus a "return with difference" of the idea of noir, corroborated by the insistence of the signifier functioning as its placeholder.

Naremore's constructionist account of the category is utterly dependent upon the function of the signifier "noir" *qua point de capiton*. He states that, '[w]e can never know when the first film noir was made;' he cites Griffiths' *Muscateers of Pig Alley* (1912) and Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1913) as possible contenders.[120] In light of the

[117] It is, moreover, this repetition/substitution that – apropos of the discussion of the *point de capiton* in this chapter – allows diverse films such as *Laura* and *The Maltese Falcon* to be called "*noir*" in the first place.
[118] Fink, 'Real Cause', p. 224.
[119] Ibid., p. 224.
[120] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 13. *Muscateers of Pig Alley*. Dir. DW Griffith. USA, Biograph Company, 1912; *Fantômas*. Dir. Louis Feuillade. France, Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont, 1913.

productive function of the *point de capiton* in discourse, it can, however, be suggested that the first film noir was "made" in the first writings on the category in 1946 (and made again in 1955).[121] Borde and Chaumeton – quoting Georges Sadoul – suggest that '*The Maltese Falcon* creates, in one fell swoop, the conventions of film noir.'[122] The *Panorama* therefore retroactively posits Huston's work as the original film noir, the very core of the category from which the analysis of all its films can proceed. Like Minerva's owl, it seems that the Maltese Falcon too spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk: the film (whose narrative is subject to a climactic *point de capiton*) and the category to which it contributes both depend upon their retroactive determination. As a function of the *point de capiton*, film noir – as Vernet notes – 'thus finds itself to be literally (but also in all senses of the term) a critical object: invented by French criticism.'[123] Indeed, when the signifier "noir" entered the Anglo-American tradition in the 1970s, this structure was repeated with the establishment of the neo-noir discourse.[124] At every instance, the intervention of the *point de capiton* constitutes the cinematic category "noir" and enables its critical discourse; as Lacan notes, '[e]verything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier.'[125] Noir is thus structured by the *point de capiton*.

[121] And again and again, with the remakes and neo-noir films of the 1970s and 1980s. See Chapter 4.
[122] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 34.
[123] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 6.
[124] See Chapter 4.
[125] Lacan, *S3*, p. 268.

## 5. *Double Indemnity*, the Graph of Desire, Metalepsis

The "retroactive transmutation of the scene" is, it has already been noted, discernible not only in the cinematic category but also in the filmic objects that constitute it. The relation between the first scene and the penultimate scene of *Double Indemnity* suggests the metonymic-metaphoric relation between signifiers and the resultant production of the signified theorised with the *point de capiton*. The film presents a narrative structure in which a scene at the end of the film gives meaning to a scene at the beginning. The film's opening sequence – a desperate confession in a darkened office – cannot be understood until it is brought into connection with a subsequent scene: the murder and attempted murder of the final flashback.[126] There is an indeterminacy to the first scene of *Double Indemnity* that suggests Lacan's dialectic of anticipation and retroaction.[127] A man enters a building at night, presumably his workplace. He appears to be unwell. There is an unspecified stain on his left shoulder. He speaks into the Dictaphone, 'I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it': a line which anticipates its own retroactive determination. He announces that he is Walter Neff. He introduces characters and elements – the Dietrichson case, a murder for which he is responsible – but their meaning is uncertain. He gestures to his shoulder with the line, 'No visible scars, 'til now that is', thereby conferring meaning to the stain, which now becomes a wound. The scene then dissolves into a flashback. Now, fast-forwarding through the film to arrive at the scene which finally produces the meaning of this first one, Phyllis Dietrichson hides a revolver beneath her chair and Neff walks through the door. Their dialogue retroactively modifies preceding events: 'We were talking about automobile insurance. You were thinking about murder. I was thinking about that anklet'. Finally, as first Phyllis shoots Neff, and then Neff – wounded but not dead – kills her, the

[126] Considering a film in this way, it is tempting to designate this juxtaposition the "death drive version" of the narrative, which is to say, the shortest distance between two points.
[127] Indeed, Richard Dyer suggests that noir is characterised by an 'endemic epistemological uncertainty' (Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 110).

meaning of that first scene has been revealed. As he staggers out of the Dietrichson house (and presumably makes his way back to the office), the end of the film rejoins its beginning and the full import of Neff's confession can now be understood. The bullets that pierced their bodies are the *points* that stitch this scene to the first; the door that closes behind Neff here seals the meaning of his confession back at the office.

This structure of retroaction can be diagrammed as the elementary cell of the Graph of Desire.[128] The first scene of *Double Indemnity* can be considered a "first signifier", designated $S_1$; the subsequent scene that determines the first, a "second signifier", $S_2$.[129] The progression of the narrative from this first scene to the second can be conceived of as the diachronic chain of signifiers, designated on the Graph of Desire by the vector $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$. When Neff and Phyllis shoot each other at $S_2$, this provides the film with a punctuating mark; it brings into operation the structure of the *point de capiton*, the retrogressive vector that intersects with the signifying chain. The *point de capiton* constitutes a synchronic intervention at $S_1$ that retroactively determines the meaning of the wounded man sitting at his desk. The indeterminacy of this first scene is suddenly fixed by its relation to the second. The first of these intersections, which Lacan designates A, corresponds to the plot of the film as a synchronic whole; it is the structural relation of the elements of the narrative, the locus of the Law of the film, where the articulation of the narrative (i.e. the film as signifying chain) is inscribed.

Neff's bullet wound is invested with meaning at the second intersection – the instance of the signification of the Other, *s*(A) – which constitutes a signification that produces a signified. This, it should be remembered, is the structure of metaphor, the 'precise point at which meaning is produced in nonmeaning.'[130] The same is true of other films noirs that feature such a flashback narrative structure: *Sunset Blvd.*, *D.O.A.*,

[128] See Appendix 1.
[129] Designating the S and S` of the Elementary Cell as $S_1$ and $S_2$ follows the post-Lacanian practice of translating these signifiers into the Lacanian algebra. Cf. Fink, *LTL*, p. 114.
[130] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 423.

and *The Killers* all feature a later scene, $S_2$, that retroactively determines their opening sequences, $S_1$. For example, it is not until Norma shoots Gillis in the penultimate scene of *Sunset Blvd.* that it is revealed how a washed-up writer finished face-down in a faded film star's swimming pool.[131] Indeed, other retroactive movements of noir – filmic and cinematic, in Cohen-Séat's sense – can be diagrammed in this way. For example, recalling the creation of the critical category of film noir in the 1940s, $S_1$ can be considered the Hollywood movies, made and released in America between 1941 and 1945; $S_2$ is then the point at which the distribution of these films in France in the summer of 1946 motivated film critics to designate them "noir". The intersection (A) is the locus of the inscription of the filmic objects as a chain within the cinematic discourse: the reception of the films by the film critics as big Other. The instance of the signification of the Other, *s*(A) – where the meaning of the films is produced retroactively – is engendered by the connection of $S_1$ to $S_2$ through the work of Frank, Chartier, et al. The vector of the critical signifier "noir" *qua point de capiton* intersects the vector of the chain of signifiers constituted by the American films – first at $S_2$ in 1946 and then retroactively at $S_1$ – where the signification "noir" is produced. The films thus become what they always-already appear to have been. To render this process concretely at the level of the sentence would be to state quite simply that, "*Double Indemnity* is a film noir". The structure of *Double Indemnity* is therefore the structure of the noir category itself; its retroactive temporality is the temporality of Lacan's Symbolic order.

Furthermore, that the structure of retroaction found in *Double Indemnity, Sunset Blvd.* and *D.O.A.* presents a "dead man" long before he receives his mortal wound thus

[131] It is interesting to note, however, that that is not in fact the final scene of the film. After making his confession, Neff's partner Keyes shows up to reveal that the *point de capiton* is always subject to a further signification; instead of bleeding out in the office or escaping south of the border, Neff will meet the gas chamber. Equally, *Sunset Blvd.* ends not with Gillis but with Norma's last close up, and *D.O.A.* ends not with the neat summation of the plot, but with Frank's death – the murder he reported in the first scene. This impossibility of an *absolutely final* signifier will be explored in the next chapter.

suggests the metaleptic reversal – an inversion of effect and cause – inherent to retroactivity. The logic of psychoanalysis is characterised by such a metalepsis: for Freud the effect often determined its cause. For example, recalling the Wolf Man's symptoms, *Nachträglichkeit* presents what Žižek describes as the 'paradox of trauma *qua* cause that does not pre-exist its effects but is itself retroactively "posited" by them.'[132] More generally, Freud's metapsychology often depended upon the determination of a cause by its effect; consider, for example, the speculative journey Freud made from the manifestations of adult sexual relations and practices to the hypothesis of infantile sexuality in the *Three Essays on Sexuality*, a movement of return through which 'the cause retroactively becomes what it always-already was.'[133] Paradoxically, the "cause" becomes the effect of its effects.[134]

To reiterate, *Nachträglichkeit* interrupts the forward movement of time. By insisting upon its retroactive dimension, Freud inscribed metalepsis as its structuring principle. Logically, the cause (trauma) should precede its effects (symptom), but chronologically, the cause is determined *qua* cause after the effects (*après-coup*) because it had no existence *qua* cause until the movement of return retroactively determined it as such: chronologically the effect can be considered therefore to precede the cause.[135] And following Lacan's transcription of the Freudian concept into structural linguistic terms, the *point de capiton* is – equally, although differently – the inscription of metalepsis in the signifying chain. Chronologically, the sentence precedes its full stop; its articulation as a chain of signifiers precedes its determination as a signifying structure. Logically, however, if the sentence is considered as a grammatically complete, meaningful articulation, then the "cause" of a sentence is the *point de capiton*, the terminal punctuation mark that brings it into existence. The structure of signification

[132] Žižek, *Metastases*, p. 32.
[133] Ibid., p. 32.
[134] This is suggested by the difference between "effect" as a noun and a verb: the latter – as in, "to effect a change" – situates "effect" on the side of the cause.
[135] See Edelman, 'Seeing Things', p. 95.

that the *point de capiton* engenders is the cause of meaning. The "cause" of the sentence appears *after* its articulation, and its sense is thus constructed retroactively. With recourse to the Graph, $S_2$ is the cause of (the meaning of) $S_1$: the latter had no meaning until retroactively determined by the former. Chronologically then, the sentence *qua* meaningful construction can emerge only *after* its full stop; structurally, the sentence – as an effect of meaning – is posited retroactively by the *point de capiton qua* cause.[136] The metalepsis here is more subtle; whereas, in the case of trauma, the cause is retroactively posited before the effect, in the structure of the sentence, the cause comes *after* the effect – the former retroactively positioning the latter as its antecedent.[137]

This structural relation is suggested by the kind of temporality involved in noir films such as *Double Indemnity*. The flashback is a device that allows these films to effect a metaleptic reversal – to present effect before cause – through a non-linear narrative. The examples are striking: Walter Neff sits down to die in *Double Indemnity* long before he is "killed" by Phyllis Dietrichson; Frank Bigelow walks into a San Francisco police station to report his own murder and then proceeds to explain how to the baffled detectives in *D.O.A.*; and *Sunset Blvd.* takes the even more extreme step of presenting Joe Gillis face down in a swimming pool, dead, and then having him explain from a narrative afterlife how Norma Desmond came to shoot him in the back. Marc Vernet's reading of the narrative structure of such films noirs and his comments on *Double Indemnity* in particular can help illuminate this structure. Vernet identifies two

[136] There is a much more far-ranging Lacanian discourse on the "cause" – as in, for example, the object-cause of desire, the Freudian cause, or the lost cause – that cannot be entered into here (see Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 1964*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1977), p. 128). See also the discussion of tuché and cause in the next chapter.

[137] The topology of the Möbius strip is instructive: the paradox here is that it is difficult to render the dialectical relation of cause and effect involved in the production of meaning in language *through* the linear restrictions of the written word. A certain Möbius "twist" is effected by the intervention of the *point de capiton* that transforms signifier into signified. In the sentence, the cause (punctuation) is situated at this twist; it produces an effect (meaning) at a point logically anterior, but chronologically posterior to itself. Žižek suggests that the Möbius strip is the proper model of the dialectic itself, noting that Hegel determined the process as 'a "circle returned upon itself"' (Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 215).

narrative moments: 'the set-up [*mise en place*]' and the black hole or 'enigma [pot au noir].'[138] The "set up" is the promise of a coherent story; the opening of a film noir offers 'a foretaste of what will be the truth: the final pleasure, the solution of the intrigue.'[139] This corresponds to the anticipatory vector of the diachronic signifying chain; it is the suggestion that the narrative will progress in a linear fashion. The "black hole" is a sudden, violent interruption that manifests 'the force of its relation with the set-up by revealing the gaps and marking out the absences contained within its own movement.'[140] This enigma is a synchronic intervention into the linear progression of the narrative, which effects a transformation.

What is most interesting in this discussion is the relation between these two narrative moments that Vernet theorises. It is not a question of which comes first; rather, it is the relationship between these elements – their juxtaposition – that produces an effect, thus recalling the differential system of signifiers that constitutes Symbolic structure. Apropos of *Double Indemnity* in particular, Vernet notes that, '[a]lthough the set-up is logically speaking the first step in the development of the narrative, chronologically speaking it does not have to be the first sequence of the film.'[141] The metaleptic inversion here allows Vernet to emphasise a structural relation between elements. The set up in *Double Indemnity* – Neff's first visit to the Dietrichson house, which initiates the linear progression of the flashback – is in fact the second scene of the film; the first scene Vernet considers part of the enigma, the 'second movement of film noir.'[142] He articulates this relation between set up and enigma in terms of question and answer. Logically, a question must be asked in order that an answer can be given: that is the structural relation between the two elements. However, as *Double Indemnity* shows, a question does not always chronologically precede its answer. This suggests a Lacanian

[138] Vernet, 'Filmic Transaction', pp. 59 & 62.
[139] Ibid., p. 61.
[140] Ibid., p. 65.
[141] Ibid., p. 62.
[142] Ibid., p. 62.

articulation in terms of the structural relation of logical precedence rather than a chronological relation; Vernet's structure is not specified in relation to a clock, it is not constructed in terms of chronometric units. It expresses not a linear progression but the circular narrative of the film.

Vernet is concerned with the relation between the second scene in the film – the set up ($S_1$ *qua* question) of the linear narrative as Neff first visits the Dietrichson house – and the first scene – Neff's confession – as an aspect of the violent interruption of the black hole of Phyllis and Neff's mutual destruction ($S_2$ *qua* answer). However, the properly Lacanian metaleptic inversion relates to the microstructure of this enigma: the relation between the effect of the confession ($S_1$ *qua* answer) and the murders as its cause ($S_2$ *qua* question). Despite these differences, Vernet's theoretical constructions can provide further insight into this relationship. After Lévi-Strauss, Vernet describes the enigma as 'a question without an answer or an answer without a question.'[143] The opening scene of *Double Indemnity* provides answers to questions that have not yet been asked: the Dietrichson case was a murder, the culprit is the man speaking into the Dictaphone. The answers (*qua* effect) proffered by the confessions paradoxically ask questions themselves; they ask a question of meaning, thus constituting a kind of "set up", $S_1$, in their own right. This set up gestures towards its retroactive determination; it will be "answered" by $S_2$, the penultimate scene of murder (question *qua* cause). This complex double relation of question and answer is therefore that of cause and effect in the dialectic of anticipation and retroaction. Vernet evokes this structure when he notes that, '[i]t is only with the resolution of the intrigue at the film's conclusion that the answer will finally rejoin its question.'[144] This metaleptical statement describes the intervention of the *point de capiton*, the signifier that transmutes the scene. It is the moment, for example, that a French signifier transforms films such as *Double Indemnity*

[143] Ibid., p. 67.
[144] Ibid., p. 67.

and *D.O.A.* into noirs; they are retroactively constituted as the "answer" to a critical "question" posed by Frank and Chartier. Moreover, it is the climactic moment of *Double Indemnity*, where the answer ($S_1$) finds its question ($S_2$) as Phyllis' bullet finds Neff's shoulder and Neff's bullets then find her. The effect finally finds its cause and he slips out of the house to return to the office and make his confession.

Furthermore, this circular narrative in *Double Indemnity* confers a sense of fatalism on the film, a sense which is said to pervade noir as a whole.[145] It is felt all the more keenly in *D.O.A.*, where it is clear from the outset that Frank Bigelow is a dead man walking. This inevitability is the product of the metaleptic reversal involved in the film's narrative looping, and as it is in film noir, so is it in Lacanian theory; there is an inevitability inherent to meaning produced by the structure of the *point de capiton*. The effect of the signifier is such that, as Lacan suggests, 'all that takes place in the order of language is always already accomplished.'[146] The relation of these first scenes – $S_1$ – to their determination by $S_2$, ensures that the outcome of events will have already been decided, even though it may seem that other narrative possibilities are still available; Ed Sikov admits that he 'was shocked when he saw [*Sunset Blvd.*] for the first time' because he did not realise that the corpse in the opening scene would be Gillis.[147] There appears to be a radical contingency to the progression of the signifying chain, until the moment the *point de capiton* intervenes to insist that Gillis, Neff and Bigelow were always already dead men.[148] Equally, the meaning of a sentence appears to always already have been what the sentence meant; this is what Miller calls the 'circular' temporality of retroaction.[149]

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[145] Cf. Turim, *Flashbacks*, p. 170; Steven Sanders, 'Film Noir and the Meaning of Life', *PFN*, pp. 91-105 (p. 96).
[146] Lacan, *S5*, p. 39.
[147] Ed Sikov, DVD Commentary, *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), Paramount Collection DVD, 2003.
[148] The relation between contingency and necessity will be explored in subsequent chapters.
[149] Miller, 'Suture', p. 34. Interestingly, Miller's discourse on origins here suggests that this circular time is in fact the birth of the linear time of the signifying chain.

## 6. *Gilda*, *The Killers*, and the Meaning of the Letter

This noir fatalism is a recurrent feature of existentialist discourse on the category, where it contributes to a sense of the meaninglessness of life as such.[150] This threat of nihilism in film noir Mark Conard suggests is an 'American response to the death of God.'[151] *Gilda*, however, appears thoroughly to be concerned with the creation of meaning, its retroactive construction through the effect of one signifier ($S_2$) on another ($S_1$).[152] Of course, any film with an element of mystery presents enigmas, in most cases, later to reveal their meaning but what makes *Gilda* particularly interesting in this regard is the presence of questions of meaning at several different levels. First, there is the typical noir intrigue: the enigma of Mundsen's tungsten monopoly and the fascist subplot that turns out to be a MacGuffin. There is also the insistence on enigma and meaningfulness centred on Gilda: she has to qualify her remarks to ensure she is understood by her Argentine dancing partner – 'I am. I mean, I was', 'I mean New York'; after the dance, Johnny – upset by her flirtations – warns Gilda, 'You can't talk to men here the way you would at home. They think you mean it', to which she replies, 'Mean what?'. The theme continues: after hitting a stranger with her discarded cigarette, Gilda asks him, 'And that *means* something?'; she even engages in a long discussion with her maid about the exact meaning of Carnival.[153] Moreover, Gilda delights in the play of meaning in the double entendre. Dancing closely with Johnny, she tells him, 'You're out of practice...dancing I mean. I could help you get in practice...dancing I mean'. By repeating the phrase 'dancing I mean' she opens up a potential polysemy, simultaneously suggesting an unspoken meaning of "dancing" while purportedly

[150] Cf. Porfirio, 'No Way Out', p. 89; Sanders, 'Meaning of Life', p. 93.
[151] Conard, 'Nietzsche', p. 19. Meaninglessness will be explored in the next chapter.
[152] This reading is indebted to Mary Ann Doane, 'Gilda: Epistemology as Striptease', *Camera Obscura*, 11 (1983), 6-27, which takes up questions of enigma and meaning in relation to psychoanalytic theories of gender. The theorisation here will be take in a slightly differently direction in relation to language and structure.
[153] Doane of course indexes this question of meaning and enigma to Gilda's femininity: 'She is an epistemological trouble' Ibid., p. 10.

negating it.[154] Gilda's double entendre is reduced to a single entendre through this insistence on meaning. Prompted by the repetition, Johnny shows that he understands Gilda's meaning too well; his angry rejection punctuates her discourse. It functions as a *point de capiton*, tying the meaning of her suggestive signifier to an explicitly sexual signified.

What makes Gilda's (and *Gilda*'s) insistence on meaning all the more interesting is her invocation of Freud. After he has described her as his boss' dirty laundry, Gilda tells Johnny, 'Your thought associations are *very* revealing', and insists that 'Any psychiatrist would tell you that *means* something'. Deborah Thomas rightly warns against putting too much emphasis on the overtly psychoanalytic moments in film noir because they can obscure more profound implications.[155] However, the accumulation of "meaningful" moments in the film combined with this reference to the meaningfulness of the symptom necessitates a psychoanalytic investigation. Gilda expresses what Frédéric Declerq and Paul Verhaeghe call 'belief' in the symptom.[156] It is this belief that brings the analysand to the analyst: the belief that their illness has a meaning that can be discovered through analysis. It is this belief that Alan Ladd's character Raven expresses in *This Gun for Hire* when he speaks of 'A kind of doctor. A psych-something. You tell your dream, you don't have to dream it anymore'. Declerq and Verhaeghe suggest that this belief amounts to belief in 'a final signifier, $S_2$, [that will] reveal the ultimate sense and signification of the $S_1$.'[157] This is what Gilda seeks throughout the film; she insists upon meaning, she *believes* in meaning. The final scene – unsatisfactory for a feminist reading such as Doane's – surrounds Gilda with meaning; the vanquishing of Mundson and her reconcilement with Johnny ultimately stabilise her world and allow the film to

[154] See ibid., p. 16.
[155] Thomas, 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir', p. 72.
[156] Frédéric Declerq and Paul Verhaeghe, 'Lacan's Analytic Goal: Le Sinthome or the Feminine Way', in *Re-Inventing the Symptom: Essays on the Final Lacan*, ed. by Luke Thurston (New York: Other Press, 2002), pp. 51-79 (p. 66).
[157] Ibid., p. 67.

end.[158] This last scene reveals the meaning of Gilda's action – a performance to rouse Johnny – retroactively determining her as a "good girl" after all. Gilda's performance is an $S_1$ seeking, waiting for its determination by an $S_2$. This recalls Lacan's suggestion that the retroactive production of meaning is anticipated by the signifier. Gilda's "misbehaviour" is a signifying chain ordered in anticipation of signifiers to come; this anticipation expresses the way in which the future affects the present through the structure of language.[159]

This orientation towards the future is played out through dialogue, soundtrack and cinematography in Gilda's introduction to the film. The scene provides a number of "floating signifiers", which is to say signifiers without signifieds.[160] Indeed, before the suturing movement of the *point de capiton*, this is the condition of all signifiers; they can be arranged in the uncertain signification of a half-finished sentence – this is the indeterminacy invoked to describe *Double Indemnity* – but they do not signify until they are tied to a signified through the punctuation of the chain. The floating signifiers in this scene from *Gilda* are the "canary" discussed by Johnny and Mundson, the acousmatic voice singing 'Put the Blame on Mame', and finally the empty frame before Gilda appears.[161] Hayworth's appearance on screen is the *point de capiton* that constitutes these signifiers as a meaningful chain. Her movement into the frame visually represents the movement of metaphor – the moment the signifier crosses the bar and 'stuffs the signified' – it reveals the signification of the term "canary" and constitutes a de-acousmatisation of the voice.[162] The empty frame anticipates its being filled, the signifier its retroactive signification, the voice its de-acousmatisation. This is the logical

[158] Doane, 'Gilda', p. 25.
[159] Žižek notes that the symptom is paradoxical return of the repressed 'from the future;' its pathogenic meaning can only be discerned at a later point (Žižek, *SOI*, p. 55).
[160] Cf. Jeffrey Mehlman, 'The "Floating Signifier": From Lévi-Strauss to Lacan', *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), 10-37.
[161] This was suggested by Doane's own discussion of the empty frame in this scene. See 'Gilda', pp. 7-9.
[162] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love & Knowledge 1972-73*, trans. by Bruce Fink, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1998), p. 37.

time of the anticipation of future certainty; retroactive determination is 'announced in the future perfect tense.'[163] The *point de capiton* ensures an articulation in the future anterior; it ensures that, in the preceding shot, the voice will have been Gilda's, the canary will have referred to her, and finally that the empty frame will have been a close up of her face. This circular temporality is evoked by Schrader's description of 'the over-riding *noir* theme: a passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future.'[164] Schrader suggests the interdependence of past, present and future found in noir and the structure of the language; in *Gilda*, Johnny remarks ironically that, 'I'm all future and no past'. Johnny and Gilda are, in the present, subject to future determinations of their past: for them, *the future is all past*. There is, in this sense, no future in film noir because all it entails is a return to (or of) the past. There is only a gesture towards it: futurity.[165]

This futurity is the very *raison d'être* of Siodmak's *The Killers*. With its flashback narrative, it does in fact present a metaleptical structure similar to *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Blvd.* and *D.O.A.*: it is a common, but not defining, feature of noir. However, what is particularly interesting about the *The Killers* is its status as an adaptation. As is well known, the film is based on Hemingway's short story of the same name. In fact, the whole first scene – the hoods in the diner and the execution of the Swede – is a reasonably faithful rendering of the Hemingway. But being a short story, that is where it ends, with the enigma of the Swede's passivity, with the question of why a man would wait for his own death. Siodmak's film constructs a narrative to answer that question. Therefore, if the short story is Hemingway's famous "one eighth of the iceberg", then Siodmak's project constitutes a full glaciography, determined to map the contours of the other seven eighths. The entire contribution of the script writers – John

[163] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 684.
[164] Schrader, 'Notes', p. 58.
[165] See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004) for an extended discussion of the concept.

Huston, Richard Brooks, and Anthony Veiller – is the retroactive determination of this single scene. This scene – the Hemingway story – seems then to anticipate its future signification. To explore this condition, it will be necessary to introduce Lacan's notion of the letter, or at least one version of it.

Concomitant with Lacan's three interdependent orders Real, Symbolic and Imaginary are the three dimensions of language: letter, signifier, signified. Signifiers, it should be remembered, are the differential elements of Symbolic structure and signifieds their Imaginary products. The letter then is a Real of language.[166] Lacan states that, '[b]y letter I designate the material [support] that concrete discourse borrows from language.'[167] With recourse to the 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', it seems that it is this materiality of the letter that distinguishes it; as a crumpled and discarded epistle it suggests a signifier that has no signification. It is in this sense a letter in purely formal terms. In the story neither the details of the contents nor the sender of the letter are given: it is its *form as a letter* that is important. As a material substratum, the letter remains the same throughout the story; it persists as an unchanging dimension of the Real in language. Furthermore, Lacan suggests that the materiality of the letter is 'singular', that it will not 'allow partition,' and so it becomes clear that the letter takes on the dimension of the smallest unit of language: the phoneme.[168] The letter is materialised by but not equated with printed characters as the written equivalent of the phoneme. It is therefore a formal unit; it is the signifier considered in isolation, before it enters into the combinatorial system and can structure signification.

[166] Lacan states that, '[t]he registers of the Symbolic and the Imaginary recur in the two other terms in which [Saussure] expresses the structure of language, namely, the signified and the signifier,' and furthermore, that 'the letter is in the real and the signifier in the symbolic [*la lettre, c'est dans le réel et le signifiant, dans le symbolique*]' (Lacan, *S3*, p. 53; *Le Séminaire, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2006), p. 126.
[167] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 413.
[168] Lacan, 'Seminar On "The Purloined Letter"', in *Écrits*, pp. 6-50 (p. 16).

Already discovered in the above mentioned scene from *Gilda*, the letter is the free-floating, 'pure signifier' before it joins the signifying chain.[169] It is the signifier before it has acquired a linguistic value, in the sense that it is inscribed in the differential system of the Symbolic. The indeterminate support of language, it cannot signify but it anticipates its future signification. To formalise this notion in the Lacanian algebra, the letter is $S_1$ disconnected from $S_2$. It should be written in the Lacanian algebra as $S_1$... to signal its incompleteness.[170] The letter only becomes a signifier when connected to $S_2$: without $S_2$, $S_1$ has no status. This structure grants the letter a meaning that it did not have at the outset.[171] Signifiers do not signify anything considered separately from the signification that they generate; the letter thus constitutes a dimension of meaninglessness inherent to the process of meaning-making. Freud identified this signifier without signification in his case studies. For instance, with the Rat Man Freud tracked the phoneme *rat* as it circulated in the unconscious to form 'verbal bridges' between the signifiers *Ratten, Raten, Spielratte, heiraten.*[172] Identifying with rats (*Ratten*) as a child, his "rat complex" incorporated the idea of instalments or repayments (*Raten*), which was associated with father, a gambler (*Spielratte*), as well as the idea of getting married (*heiraten*) to his fiancé. The meaningless phoneme connects the signifiers through a metonymic/metaphoric process, joining together what Bruce Fink calls these 'purloined letters,' to form a signifying chain in which meaning insists not at any given point but along its entire length.[173]

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[169] Ibid., p. 10.
[170] Recalling the discussion of *Gilda* above, Declerq and Verhaeghe suggest that belief in the symptom 'consists in adding 3 dots (...) [sic] to the letter: $S_1$...' (Declerq and Verhaeghe, 'Lacan's Analytic Goal', p. 67).
[171] Declerq and Verhaeghe give an interesting Freudian example of the passage from the letter to the signifier from the paper on fetishism and the "*Glanz auf der Nase*": it is the "translation" of "Glanz" from the German for "shine" to the English "glance" that establishes the necessary chain of signifiers (see ibid., p. 80n34).
[172] Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)', SE X, pp. 153-249 (p. 213).
[173] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), p. 22.

In relation to the Siodmak film, the Hemingway short story is just such a letter, a floating signifier – $S_1$... – it anticipates its determination by a future signifier – $S_2$ – which will engage it in the differential Symbolic system (of the story of the film) and begin the process of signification. Siodmak's endeavour, the quest to give meaning to Swede's enigma, is this very $S_2$. It is the same future-oriented aspect of the $S_1$ that produces the insistence on meaning seen in *Gilda*. The letter – $S_1$... – is the element responsible for the dimension of futurity in language; Edelman insists that 'this ellipsis itself should be understood as the defining mark of futurism.'[174] In Siodmak's *The Killers*, this ellipsis – the defining mark of futurism – is the Swede, his enigmatic stare as he waits passively to look death in the face. This ellipsis is in fact repeated at the level of dialogue: the Swede confesses, 'I did something wrong...once'; the emphatic silence breaks up his sentence between words. The signifying chain here yearns for its completion; the signifier "once", however, is not a *point de capiton*. It brings no meaning to his statement; the chain remains palpably incomplete. The meaning of this scene remains entirely unclear. It is this mystery that drives the plot: it *demands* an explanation. Swede's confession, his death, and his silk handkerchief constitute the $S_1$ in need of explanation; they impel Reardon to reconstruct Swede's history, to produce the $S_2$ that is constituted by the revelations of the rest of the film. As before, meaning thus comes to the scene retroactively through the structure of its relation to the rest of the film that it precedes.

The letter is thus the anticipatory element of language, and the structure of the signifying chain its retroactive determinant. The relationship between the two allows meaning to be produced both in linguistic constructions and the narrative constructions of film noir. The relation between past, present and future in noir is therefore

[174] Edelman, *No Future*, p. 37.

comparable to the structures of *Nachträglichkeit* and the *point de capiton* in psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the interdependence of the vectors of diachrony and synchrony constitutes both the temporality of Lacan's Symbolic order and the noir narratives of *Double Indemnity*, *Gilda* and *The Killers*. Having introduced the concept of the letter – the Real of language – it will now be necessary to explore the function of the Real more generally in relation to the Symbolic structure here identified. While this project does not aim for a theory of subjectivity, Lacanian formulations of the subject and its relation to structure will be instructive in further understanding the constitution of film noir. The next chapter will make the transition from the structure of the *s*(A) – the signification of the Other – to the S(Ⱥ) – the signifier of the lack in the Other – or the point at which the Symbolic order is found to be incomplete, in order to investigate the numerous contradictions encompassed in the formation of noir. Further to this, Miller's suggestion that the subject is 'the possibility of one signifier more' will be used to interrogate the apparent lack of boundaries to this critical category and the enduring possibility of adding "one film more".[175]

[175] Miller, 'Suture', p. 33.

## Chapter 2. Film Noir Doesn't Exist: Impossibility, Definition and the Point of Failure

The question arises, What was lacking in the account of film noir given in the previous chapter? The answer is that which distinguishes Lacanian psychoanalysis from structuralism proper: the Real. This chapter will in this sense proceed from the structure of *s*(A) to the lack in S(Ⱥ): from the signification of the Other to the signifier of the lack in the Other. The vector $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$ has already been associated with a dimension of the Real; the signifier $S_1$ was conceived in terms of the letter, Lacan's early conception of the Real as brute materiality. However, the tacitly Lacanian dimension of Vernet's work suggests a number of ways of approaching the Real as theorised by Lacan in his later work. As trauma, as impossibility or failure, and – with the introduction of a crucial distinction – as pre- and post-symbolic, Lacan's theory of the Real provides an invaluable tool in the pursuit of an ontology of film noir.

### 1. Tuché, Automaton and Noir Narrative

In his study, 'The Filmic Transaction', Vernet reflects upon the general characteristics of the films noirs under consideration (*The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity, The Big Sleep, The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Out of the Past*, and *The Enforcer* (1951)). He notes that the story often begins with an air of quietude which is suddenly and brutally disturbed.[1] This provides the films with a structure of contrasts which, as discussed in the previous chapter, Vernet characterises in terms of two narrative elements: the 'Set-Up [*mise-en-place*]' and the 'Enigma [*pot au noir*]: the "black hole".'[2] The opening

[1] *The Lady from Shanghai*. Dir. Orson Welles. USA, Columbia Pictures, 1947; *The Enforcer*. Dir. Bretaigne Windust. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1951.
[2] Vernet, 'FT', pp. 58, 62.

movements of the plot – literally a "putting in place" – establish a network of signifiers that denote tranquillity and comfort. For example, Sam Spade quietly rolls a cigarette in his office and a lady enters; Walter Neff knocks on a door in the summer afternoon; and Jeff Bailey leaves for a meeting with his fiancée. These are the foundations of a coherent narrative; the initial relations between characters are established and the elements necessary for the progression of the narrative appear. The opening scenes designate and clarify roles and attributions of each character in a manner Vernet compares to a feature identified by Vladimir Propp's analysis of folk tales: the initial establishment of a contract between characters that regulates their relations in the story that will follow.[3] With the satisfactory arrangement of elements – everything is in its place and seemingly destined to go well – the unfolding of narrative can begin. Vernet concludes that the set up insists that 'the story *will* advance in rectilinear fashion.'[4] However, the apparently perfect accord of this first movement will suddenly fall into chaos due to a collision with the second movement: the black hole. Vernet's examples emphasise the violence and contingency of these irruptive moments; with one shot Miles Archer is dead, with one step Joseph Rico plunges to his death. The set up had promised an orderly progression but now 'the expected disappears from the film with a brutal and unpredictable force.'[5] Death's intervention interrupts and disconnects the narrative; it shoots the narrative full of holes causing it to fragment. The black hole is a sudden, disturbing appearance that upsets the established order.

Already this begins to suggest an approach to film noir narrative in terms of Lacan's concepts of tuché and automaton and a formulation of the Real as trauma. Nowhere does Vernet invoke such Lacanian concepts, nor does he anywhere mention Lacan by name but his method of combining Freud and Lévi-Strauss – psychoanalysis

[3] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. by Laurence Scott (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1958).
[4] Vernet, 'FT', p. 61.
[5] Ibid., p. 63.

and structural anthropology – is thoroughly Lacanian, and such theory can provide a powerful investigative or explanatory tool for Vernet's complex piece of structuralist film criticism.

Lacan borrows the concepts of tuché and automaton from the discussion of causality in Aristotle's *Physics*.[6] Characteristically, he redefines or "translates" these terms: tuché becomes an 'encounter with the real' and automaton 'the network of signifiers.'[7] Automaton is the machinery of the Symbolic order. It is the linear ordering that proceeds according to the laws of metaphor and metonymy. Automaton is thus the way in which the Symbolic is structured by a chain of associative connections. Lacan relates automaton to the French *automatisme* by which 'we sometimes translate into French the *Zwang* of the *Wiederholungszwang*, the compulsion to repeat.'[8] There is something compulsive about automaton; it is the pure mechanical insistence of the unfolding of the chain of signifiers in the unconscious, the functioning of the primary process that Lacan describes as 'the insistence of the signs by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle.'[9] This is the structure of the Symbolic order that characterised Lacan's work from the 1950s. He articulated this notion of automatic self-reiteration in *Seminar II* in terms of a game of coin flipping that provided a series of "pluses" and "minuses" (heads or tails). Lacan noted that, 'once the symbolic chain is constituted, as soon as you introduce a certain significant unity, in the form of unities of succession, what comes out can no longer be just anything.'[10] Through the simple act of grouping the results into sets of three – for example, "plus, plus, minus" or "minus, plus, minus" – a number of laws emerge which determine the possibility of certain

[6] See Aristotle on 'The distinction between chance and spontaneity' in *Physics*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 46-8.
[7] Lacan, *S11*, p. 52.
[8] Ibid., p. 67.
[9] Ibid., pp. 53-4.
[10] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-55*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Sylvana Tomaselli (London: Norton, 1991), p. 193.

predictable sequences; these groupings can appear only in certain combinations, making other outcomes impossible.[11] Establishing a series of relations between the elements transforms the results of a coin toss into a 'primitive symbolic organisation' that gives rise to a spontaneous and precise determination of what can appear in the chain in no way suggested by or contained in the original act of symbolic grouping.[12] Thus the Symbolic produces by itself its own structures and organisations: this is the automaton that moves by itself and the law of this network is then the realm of the possible.

However, this automatically functioning chain of signifiers will always come up against an impossibility: tuché, the Real 'which always lies behind the automaton.'[13] Tuché is something that happens as if by chance; it is the unpredictable irruption of pure contingency. It is the precipitation of an undetermined, unanticipatable event that interrupts the smooth functioning of automaton. Tuché disrupts this automatic, law-like regulated stringing together of signifiers. It is a hitch or obstacle that causes the signifying chain to falter: the shock of the intrusion of the Real. A painful and terrifying intervention that wholly perturbs the Symbolic order; it appears as a tear in the blanket of reality. Lacan describes this tuché as 'an encounter (...) with a real that always eludes us' because it appears as something inassimilable; it cannot be integrated into the chain of signifiers.[14] Lacan elaborates: 'the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter – first presented [itself] in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma.'[15] Tuché as event is thus a traumatic encounter that cannot be symbolised. If

[11] See Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, pp. 16-19.
[12] Lacan, *S2*, p. 193.
[13] Lacan, *S11*, p. 54.
[14] Ibid., p. 53.
[15] Lacan, *S11*, p. 55.

automaton functions according to the pleasure principle, then tuché is the trauma of an encounter with a Real *beyond the pleasure principle*.[16]

Thus, the formulation of tuché situates Lacan's theory in Freud's studies of war neuroses and traumatic neuroses. In the figurative biological terms of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's notion of trauma extended the concept of the wound from the physical to the psychical; it was conceptualised as a breach in the protective layer that sheltered the psyche from excessive external stimuli. Freud designated as "traumatic" any such excitation that was powerful enough to break through this otherwise efficacious barrier.[17] Furthermore, Freud emphasised the utterly contingent nature of trauma; it is the impact of an event for which the psychic apparatus was entirely unprepared, an experience Freud called 'fright [*Schreck*].'[18] Expressed in economic terms, Freud described trauma as 'an experience which (...) presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates.'[19] The traumatic breach causes the mental apparatus to be flooded with excitation. The psyche is overwhelmed by this stimulus; its mechanism is disrupted. Freud suggested that, faced with the problem of mastering this energy, the "normal" functioning of the psyche – that is, the pleasure principle – is suspended. It instead becomes fixed upon the task of binding, making continual attempts to circumscribe this excess so that the dominance of the pleasure principle can be reinstated. This is the core of Freud's 'compulsion to repeat.'[20]

In these terms, the connection can be made between Lacan's tuché and automaton and trauma and the repetitive insistence of the psyche. Lacan's example

[16] Ibid., pp. 53-4. This is of course distinct from the contemporary discourse on trauma theory; see, for example, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).
[17] Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)', SE XVIII, pp. 3-66 (p. 29).
[18] Ibid., p. 12.
[19] Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1916-1917 [1915-1917])*, SE XVI, p. 275.
[20] Freud, SE XVIII, p. 35.

comes from *The Interpretation of Dreams* and illustrates his conception of the way in which tuché "appears" in the repetition of automaton, in a manner that will then shed light on Vernet's theory of "narrative trauma". In the *Interpretation,* Freud had already been led, by the consideration of unpleasurable "anxiety" or "punishment" dreams, to qualify his notion that the dream was the fulfilment of a wish, so that it became 'a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish.'[21] However, Freud's work with trauma compelled him to question this founding principle; the dreams of traumatic neuroses led him 'to admit for the first time an exception to the proposition that dreams are the fulfilment of wishes.'[22] Instead, Freud suggested, they arise 'in obedience to the compulsion to repeat:' the necessity to bind excess stimulation and thus reinstate the pleasure principle.[23] Lacan comments that, 'Freud shows that we can conceive here of what occurs in the dreams of traumatic neurosis only at the level of the most primitive functioning – that in which it is a question of obtaining the binding of energy.'[24] Such dreams function to relive a traumatic experience as a means of binding it; repetition is an attempt to integrate this tuché harmoniously into the automaton of psychic organisation. In line with Freud's subsequent modification of his theory of the dream, Lacan's formulation of the Real as trauma provides further understanding of one of the most striking examples from the *Interpretation*: the dream of the burning child.

Freud recounted the dream of a father whose son had just died; in the dream, his son who '*was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?"*.'[25] At which point he awoke to find a fallen candle had set fire to his son's body which lay in the other room. Freud suggested that the dream fulfilled both the father's wish to see his son again and his need to sleep. Indeed, to prolong his sleep was to prolong the life of his son in the vision

[21] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Part 1*, SE IV, p. 160.
[22] Freud, SE XVIII, p. 32.
[23] Ibid., p. 32.
[24] Lacan, *S11*, p. 51.
[25] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Part 2*, SE V, p. 509.

and so the glare of the fire in the other room became the fire with which the child burns in the dream. Lacan's question then is, '*What is it that wakes the sleeper*?'[26] It is not because the intrusion of the glare became too strong; the dream had transformed this into the element by which it sustained itself. Instead, Lacan suggests that what wakes him is a missed encounter with the Real, with the psychic trauma of the son's death. There was then more of the *Real* in the dream image of his son than in the perceptual reality of the fire in the next room. He awoke to reality to escape the traumatic Real attached to the accusation in the child's words, which touched upon the father's guilt regarding the death of his son. The automaton of the father's psyche could not assimilate the trauma and so had to present the tuché of the death of his son indirectly; his son burned with a 'fire [that] bears on (...) the real.'[27] The glare of the fire became the blinding light of the Real. The son's reproach can illuminate only the very absence of this Real itself; it 'designates a beyond that makes itself heard in the dream.'[28]

This relation between tuché *qua* trauma and automaton leads to Lacan's understanding of the Real as cause. Automaton is the compulsive attempt to integrate the traumatic event in the unconscious; Lacan describes this process of automaton as the 'subjectifying homeostasis that orientates the whole functioning defined by the pleasure principle.'[29] It is the network of signifiers woven around the point of impact of the traumatic event. The Symbolic is thus a system shaped by the intrusion of the Real. The Real therefore appears as an accidental order that functions as cause. It is the pure contingency of tuché that founds the framework of the Symbolic and so, as Paul Verhaeghe notes, with this theory, 'Lacan solves the classical question about the cause

[26] Lacan, *S11*, p. 58.
[27] Ibid., p. 59.
[28] Ibid., p. 59.
[29] Ibid., p. 55.

of the cause. The first cause lacks any determination whatsoever.'[30] As such, the Real as cause cannot be found directly: it is always disguised. What is found in the dream is a placeholder, a stand-in; automaton can represent the trauma only in a veiled form. The Real is beyond the dream, what it has hidden. Never present, it is, as Žižek suggests in an Althusserian invocation, '*the absent cause of the Symbolic*.'[31] This cause can never effect its power directly; it must always operate through disturbances within the Symbolic and is only detectable *as* these disturbances. This is why an encounter with the Real, such as that in the burning child dream, is always a *missed encounter*. Moreover, the absent cause is associated with an idea of failure; it can be detected where the signifying chain is disrupted. It is, for example, the point at which the analysand's discourse falters, where the free association stalls or stops. It reaches a certain limit: the Real. The chain halts when it touches upon a traumatic association. Lacan suggests that 'there is cause only in something that doesn't work;' this point of failure then becomes the point of departure for a new chain of associations and the automaton continues.[32]

With these concepts of trauma and symbolisation now explored, Vernet's analysis of film noir narrative can be understood to function in terms comparable to tuché and automaton. While it would of course be a profound error of category to assert a direct connection between the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and the unconscious and the story-telling devices of the cinema, there is nonetheless a certain corollary between the structures of disruption and repetition presented in each case.[33] When Vernet describes the "first movement" of the film noir as 'a narrative machine whose

[30] Paul Verhaeghe, 'Causation and Destitution of a Pre-ontological Non-entity: On the Lacanian Subject', in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1999), pp. 164-189 (p. 172).
[31] Žižek, *Metastases*, p. 30, emphasis added.
[32] Lacan, *S11*, p. 22.
[33] Indeed, this understanding is mediated through the reading of a dream, which is comparable to Vernet's reading of a film. Moreover, for a convincing and sensitive exploration of the effects of the mass psychological trauma of World War 2 on the production of film narratives, see Kaja Silverman's discussion of "historical trauma" in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 52-121.

every part is well-oiled and in gear,' it is impossible not to hear the mechanised clamour of the Lacanian automaton.[34] The opening scenes of the set-up establish a system of Symbolic law; a series of exchanges between characters positions them as elements within a system of differences, such as "hero", "victim", or "dispatcher". The "hero" has a task with precise requirements and agreed remuneration – a missing person must be found (*The Maltese Falcon*), a blackmailer silenced (*The Big Sleep*), a prisoner guarded (*The Enforcer*) – and the accomplishment of this task will result in the restoration of normality – a family reunited, justice served. The contract Vernet describes is the guarantee of the big Other; like the "lawful" development of the signifying chain, '[t]he impossible is not considered therein.'[35] Equally, the "signs" that make up Vernet's first movement can be thought of as functioning under a form of narrative pleasure principle. The set-up is characterised by a sense of calm, order and propriety; it functions as a coherent signifying chain imbued with meaning. The contract establishes only a pleasurable tension that orients the film towards 'the final pleasure, the solution of the intrigue.'[36] Vernet describes this unfolding of the narrative set-up in terms of the determinedness of the inexorable approach of Walter Neff on crutches in the title sequence from *Double Indemnity*; this is the compulsive insistence of the automatism of the signifying chain, the rectilinear advancement of a narrative characterised by stability and certainty.

However, just as the signifying chain must come up against an impossibility, so too must the set-up meet the black hole. This black hole is a tychic irruption of unexpected violence, whose force turns the narrative space inside out. There occurs, as a result, a 'generalized inversion of signs:' an honest man is revealed to be a criminal (*Out of the Past*), an insurance agent to be a murderer (*Double Indemnity*), an innocent

[34] Vernet, 'FT', p. 62.
[35] Ibid., p. 61. The Real shows this guarantee of the big Other to be worthless.
[36] Ibid., p. 61.

woman a liar (*The Lady from Shanghai*).[37] The normal functioning of the narrative is disturbed: all continuity is lost. The intervention of the black hole constitutes then a form of narrative trauma. It is an intervention that overwhelms and disrupts the first movement. The set-up is placed into doubt by this second movement; the fiction it proposed is suddenly 'flawed, corroded, blown apart.'[38] The well-oiled narrative machine is stopped dead in its tracks; the 'agreeable, straight-forward and seamless story has now fallen into pieces.'[39] Vernet can be understood to describe the impact of the traumatic Real upon the Symbolic when he suggests that, 'the black hole will manifest the force of its relation with the set-up by revealing the gaps and marking out the absences contained within its own movement.'[40] The narrative automaton is suddenly opened up; it appears inconsistent. The eruption of the black hole uncovers an anomaly, a failure; the pleasures promised by the set-up are now impossible.

Furthermore, Vernet frames the intervention of this black hole in terms of a missed encounter; the violent action often takes the form of a murder, which 'eliminates the first witness and thus the first indices of the truth.'[41] A vital element is missing: only Rico can testify, only Archer can identify the murderer, only Geiger can explain his affairs, and so the narrative thread is broken. The film is suddenly engulfed by a black hole and any connection to an originary cause is lost. Instead, the cause must be retroactively established by the continuation of the narrative automaton. The tychic black hole thus functions as the absent, Real cause that shapes the Symbolic.[42] The fiction might unexpectedly pass from familial squabble to slaughterhouse, romance to cataclysm but the film nonetheless continues. If the impact of the black hole marks out

[37] Ibid., p. 64.
[38] Ibid., p. 66.
[39] Ibid., p. 66.
[40] Ibid., p. 66.
[41] Ibid., p. 63.
[42] The metalepsis described in Chapter 1 can be imbued with further significance. The metaleptic relation between set-up and black hole in *Double Indemnity* could be said to depend upon just such an "absent cause": it is the shocking murder of Mr Dietrichson (that is not shown directly but rather indirectly suggested) that disrupts the narrative structure and requires retroactive reconstruction by Neff's confession.

the absences contained within the set-up, the films present these gaps in the form of questions to be answered by the unfolding of the story: Who is the killer? What is the connection? What is going to happen? Vernet implicitly suggests this relation between automaton and tuché as cause when he notes that, 'in uncovering a gap, we have already begun to fill it in, and in destroying one line of logic, we have already begun to construct another.'[43] The narrative automaton weaves its symbolic matrix around these gaps caused by tuché; the structure of narrative is shaped by the central void of the black hole. It must work to circumscribe the chaos induced by this traumatic tear so as to re-establish the narrative pleasure principle.[44] The black hole threatens the narrative with incomprehensibility; its intervention means that 'the film would lapse into prattle without meaning or value.'[45] It is therefore the task of the narrative automaton to overcome this threat.

Moreover, Vernet asserts a structural incompatibility between his two fields – the set-up and the black hole – which suggests a more general relation between the Symbolic and the Real. He describes the connection between the two movements in terms of asyndeton – the rhetorical omission of conjunctions between clauses – suggesting that there is a gap *between* the set-up and the black hole. This is experienced as 'a rupture in the chain of significations where the spectator feels as if he has somehow skipped a necessary logical step.'[46] There is some signifier missing that would bridge the two movements. Once again, the encounter with the Real is a missed encounter. The Real is this very absence, the impossibility of a signifier that could represent the traumatic tuché. This is 'where the spectator feels the absence of a

[43] Vernet, 'FT', p. 66.
[44] Cf. Lacan's formulation in *Seminar VII*: 'The function of the pleasure principle is, in effect, to lead the subject from signifier to signifier, by generating as many signifiers as are required to maintain at as low a level as possible the tension that regulates the whole functioning of the psychic apparatus' (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Norton, 1997), p. 119).
[45] Vernet, 'FT', p. 65.
[46] Ibid., p. 65.

necessary structural relation;' however, the necessary Lacanian reversal here is to understand that this very gap *is* the structural relation between the Symbolic and the Real.[47]

[47] Ibid., p. 65.

## 2. The Fault in the Noir Universe

The Lacanian theory of trauma *qua* Real thus presents it as a hard core resisting symbolisation: this Real is 'that which resists symbolisation absolutely.'[48] The traumatic event is thus a point of failure for the Symbolic order; it is present only as a gap or a hole in the signifying chain, an opening around which the Symbolic is structured. The Real can be given only as a lack: the lack of a signifier adequate to its signification. It cannot be inscribed (the Real is that which 'doesn't stop not being written') it is that which escapes inscription.[49] It upsets the balance of the Symbolic; it is the unsymbolisable, incomprehensible, and thus is experienced as trauma. The Real must be understood in terms of this relation to the Symbolic: a relation of impossibility, the irreducible gap between these orders. The Real is the *cause* of the repetition of the signifying chain, the repeated attempt to *signify* the impossible. Throughout his middle and late work Lacan links the Real with the concept of impossibility; in *Seminar XI*, he states that, 'we would be led to define the real as impossible,' and again emphatically, in '*Radiophonie*', 'my formula: the impossible is the real.'[50] This impossibility gives rise to failure; the Real is 'this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail.'[51] It is therefore the very point of failure of the signifying chain, what Alan Sheridan designates as 'that over which the symbolic stumbles.'[52] It is, moreover, this "stumbling" that will be of particular interest in relation to the various critical attempts to define film noir.

The Real thus occupies the place, in the Symbolic, of what cannot be signified; it does not correspond to any formulation of "reality" but is instead the very failure of the

[48] Lacan, *S1*, p. 66.
[49] Lacan, *S20*, p. 59.
[50] Lacan, *S11*, p. 167; '*Radiophonie*', in *Autre écrits* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2001), pp. 403-448 (p. 431).
[51] Lacan, *S2*, p. 164.
[52] Sheridan, *S11*, p. 280.

symbolic order to account for everything.[53] The Real is itself nothing but this impossibility of its inscription; Žižek suggests that it is 'nothing at all, just a void, an emptiness in a symbolic structure marking some central impossibility.'[54] Language therefore harbours within itself its own point of lack; there is a structural hole or gap in the Symbolic that corresponds to this impossibility of the Real. To recall again the spontaneous impossibilities in Lacan's account of the coin toss game, the Real is what the Symbolic cannot accommodate. It is a constitutive impossibility in that, just as the outcome of the coin toss game is regulated by the combinations that *cannot* occur, the signifying process is predicated upon the exclusion of this Real as traumatic, as what cannot be symbolised.

In order to delimit this impossibility, Lacan introduced the matheme that corresponds to this condition in *Le Séminaire V* as, 'S of A barred.'[55] Like the vase Lacan describes in *Seminar VII* – whose clay encloses a constitutive gap or void – the matheme as such designates both the impossibility of the Real and a way in which this impossibility can be approached.[56] This matheme is glossed by Miller – in his capacity as the editor of *Le Séminaire* – as 'the signifier of the barred Other.'[57] The Real is a lack, a gap or hole in the middle of the Symbolic order; Žižek – in fact echoing Vernet's 'Filmic Transaction' – characterises it as a 'central "black hole" around which the signifying order is interlaced.'[58] This reiterates the fundamental incompatibility between the Symbolic and the Real; it insists that any accordance between the orders is, as has already been suggested, structurally impossible. The experience of the traumatic Real is

[53] Roberto Harari suggests that Lacan's designation of this impossibility as "the Real" can be considered something of a subversive joke; the Real is that which is *unreal* (*Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: An Introduction*, trans. by Judith Filc (New York: Other Press, 2004), pp. 96-97).
[54] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 173.
[55] Lacan *S5*, p. 312.
[56] See Lacan, *S7*, p. 120.
[57] Lacan, *S5*, p. 303. The status of the *signifier* – the "S" of the "S (Ⱥ)" – is the subject of both significant development in Lacan's thought, and widespread debate in (post-)Lacanian theory; what is of interest here is the Ⱥ, the barred Other itself, the flaw in the symbolic universe.
[58] Žižek, 'The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan', in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 11-36 (p. 26).

the experience of the failure of the symbolic Law. The traumatic encounter reveals the lack in the Other; it points to that which the big Other cannot render meaningful, the point of failure necessarily within the Other.

The key to understanding Lacanian theory is this insistence that the big Other is "barred" by this impossibility, that the Symbolic is structured around a traumatic lack. Lacan further explains this is in his next Seminar when he states, 'S(Ⱥ) means that in this locus of speech [*le lieu de la parole*], in which lies (...) the set of the system of signifiers, namely of a language [*langage*], something is missing. Something which can only be a signifier is there missing.'[59] The lack in the Other suggests therefore that there is a signifier missing; Lacan reiterates this in 'Subversion of the Subject' where he suggests that the matheme should be 'read as (...) signifier of a lack in the Other, a lack inherent in the Other's very function as the treasure trove of signifiers.'[60] The Real is missing; it causes gaps and ruptures in the Symbolic order because it resists symbolisation. The signifier of the barred Other marks this lack intrinsic to the Symbolic: the impossibility of the Real in the Symbolic. Lacan's matheme designates this point of failure of the Symbolic; the Real itself cannot be signified – the signifier adequate to its symbolisation is missing – and so, Lacan suggests, '[w]e write S(Ⱥ), signifier of the barred A, to indicate this lack.'[61] Lacan's use of the matheme here aims to encircle this point of failure of the big Other, to circumscribe the locus of what cannot be symbolised.

It is here that Lacanian psychoanalysis marks its specificity: the Real is what distinguishes Lacan's theory from a structuralism such as that of Lévi-Strauss. Lacanian theory is based upon the recognition of the impossible-Real that 'has to be sought

[59] Lacan, *Séminaire VI: Le désir est son interprétation, 1958-1959*, unpublished manuscript. Session 8/4/1959.
[60] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 693.
[61] Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2006), p. 48.

beyond the dream — in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation of which there is only one representative.'[62] Lacan continues, '[t]his is the Real that governs our activities more than any other and it is psycho-analysis that designates it for us.'[63] Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasises the instabilities of language, the points of failure within the Symbolic and the malfunctions of its Law; as Lacan suggests, '[i]f linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relation by making "holes" in the meaning (…) of its discourse.'[64] Here is the specificity of Lacanian psychoanalysis: structural linguistics becomes Lacanian structuralism on the basis of the ruptures of the Symbolic engendered by the Real. Rather than as "post-structuralist", Bruce Fink describes such Lacanian theory as a 'Gödelian structuralism' that emphasises at every point the importance of structure while at the same time insisting upon a necessary lack therein.[65] The barred Other ($\not{A}$) designates this lack and thus signifies the distinctive aspect of Lacan's thought and its reformulation of classic structuralism.

This formulation of the Real in relation to the Symbolic informs Lacan's work throughout; in '*L'Étourdit*' Lacan suggests that his whole topological endeavour is founded upon this lack; it is 'from a fault in the universe that it proceeds [*c'est du défaut dans l'univers qu'il procède*].'[66] Pierre Skriabine takes this declaration to form the basis of an excellent discussion of the topology of the lack in the Other. Skriabine explicitly draws a connection between this topology and the matheme, stating that 'Lacan writes this fault in the universe [($\not{A}$)].'[67] He suggests that it is language – as a symbolic structure – that 'puts this "fault in the universe" into play,' and that the function of the

[62] Lacan, *S11*, p. 45.
[63] Ibid., p. 45.
[64] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 678.
[65] Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, p. 125.
[66] Lacan, '*L'Étourdit*', in *Autre écrits*, pp. 449-496 (p. 477).
[67] Pierre Skriabine, 'Clinic and Topology: The Flaw in the Universe', in *Lacan: Topologically Speaking*, ed. by Dragan Milovanovic and Ellie Sullivan (New York: Other Press, 2004), pp. 73-97 (p. 79).

lack, the hole, or the fault is strictly equivalent to language.[68] He notes the structuring position of the lack in the Other and proposes that Lacan's recourse to topology allows him to theorise a mode of organisation of the hole in figures such as the Möbius strip and the torus that similarly "put the hole in play", which is to say that they are models formed around or founded upon a central lack or gap. Lacan's formalisation through topology – which is derived from the logic of the barred Other – provides another means of approaching the impossibility indicated by the matheme (Ⱥ), of attempting to understand the Real as the 'fault in the universe of the signifier.'[69] This signifies the shift from the big Other (A) to the barred Other (Ⱥ) that informs the Lacanian understanding of noir in the remainder of this chapter.

Vernet's study of the historiography and ontology of noir, '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom', again suggests a tacitly Lacanian dimension in his approach. This time pursuing a film-historical analysis of noir as a cinematic category – as opposed to his structural analysis of narrative explored above – Vernet endeavours to question the foundations of noir, to destabilise its very structure. His engagement with noir, it seems, proceeds also *from a fault in the universe*. His critique of the idea of film noir suggests a number of ways in which a Real as "point of failure" can be discerned in the construction and analysis of the critical category. He identifies in noir what Lacan describes as 'the lack which is at the heart of the field of the Other.'[70] Vernet begins with an ironic description of noir as an 'object of beauty' because it is defined by both form (black and white) and content (crime), because Bogart and Bacall are to be found there, because it demonstrates the cooperation of European filmmakers and American actors, and so on.[71] It is an object of beauty, he suggests, provided it is not examined too closely; as such, Vernet is compelled to introduce a 'slightly disquieting remark:' the

[68] Ibid., p. 78.
[69] Ibid., p. 79
[70] Lacan, *S16*, p. 88.
[71] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 1.

discourse on noir has remained largely unanalysed, it appears as 'cinephilic readymade' handed down by film critics and seems 'impossible to criticize.'[72] Such "disquiet" points to the presence of a Real within the critical discourse on film noir.

Already Vernet begins to question this critical structure, to deconstruct it. This, he suggests, is something that film critics appear to have been reluctant to do: 'rare being those who venture to say that *film noir* has no clothes.'[73] He identifies Paul Schrader, James Damico, Paul Kerr and Foster Hirsch as the figures who 'have had courage to cry out in the desert that the classical list of criteria defining *film noir* is totally heterogeneous and without any foundation but a rhetorical one;' a group to which Vernet thus adds himself.[74] He characterises the standard work on noir as the repeated rehearsal of the same (un)critical gestures: a definition of noir based in Borde and Chaumeton and the contribution of a few more films to the category.[75] The idea of noir remains, in each case, unchallenged; it merely becomes further diluted and obscured. Vernet's article suggests, if not insists upon, an understanding in terms of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real and ($\not{A}$) with his almost explicitly Lacanian invocation; he states that, '[t]he cause of this situation seems to me to be a triple lack, historical, aesthetic and theoretical.'[76] Vernet explains that the "historical lack" concerns the American production of the detective film and the appearance in France of the notion of *film noir*: this is the constructionist account of the formation of noir as a critical category given in Chapter 1. What is of more interest here are Vernet's second and third points; an "aesthetic lack" that concerns the image of film noir, and a "theoretical lack" relating to the detective novel and the crime film.

[72] Ibid., p. 2.
[73] Ibid., p. 2.
[74] Ibid., p. 2.
[75] Ibid., pp. 2-4.
[76] Ibid., p. 4.

The aesthetic lack which Vernet identifies concerns the "argument over expressionism" in film noir. He notes that, beyond the apparently strange coupling of America and Germany after the war, the idea that "German Expressionist" style was introduced to film noir by European émigrés does not stand up. He reflects upon the fact that many "noir" filmmakers in Hollywood were not themselves German or Austrian, and inversely, that many émigré filmmakers had no connection with expressionism.[77] To give an example (where Vernet does not), while still in Germany in 1930, three of the key noir directors – Wilder, Siodmak and Ulmer – collaborated on the proto-neorealist *Menschen am Sonntag* (1930), a low budget exploration of the quotidian reality of "people on Sunday" in Berlin.[78] This film is both manifestly *not* of the Expressionist tradition and *very* far removed from the dark, cynical and violent films noirs they would make in Hollywood. Vernet runs through several complicating factors for the expressionist argument, such as the markedly expressive echoes of Peter Lorre in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) in Edward G. Robinson's performance in the final trial scene of Mervyn LeRoy's *Two Seconds* (1932), but the crucial point in his destabilisation of the assumptions regarding a noir visual style is marked by a simple question: he asks, '[a]re these techniques [for example, chiaroscuro lighting], in 1955, 1945, or 1940, new to the American cinema?'[79]

It is here that Vernet identifies his *lack*, the point of failure in the definition of noir as an American accommodation of émigré German Expressionism. 'Absolutely not' is Vernet's answer; he points to the work of Cecil B De Mille and Alvin Wickoff, who – from 1915 onwards – developed systematically the experiments of DW Griffith

[77] Ibid., p. 7.
[78] *Menschen am Sonntag*. Dir. Kurt Siodmak, et al.. Germany, Filmstudio Berlin, 1930. Also working on this film were fellow émigré filmmakers less associated with noir: Curt Siodmak, who went on to write numerous Hollywood horror screenplays; Fred Zinneman, who directed *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *The Day of the Jackal* (1973); and the often overlooked cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan, who did in fact work on the French *film noir Quai des brumes* (see below) and made uncredited contributions to *The Dark Mirror* and several of Ulmer's projects.
[79] *M*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Germany, Nero-Film AG, 1931; *Two Seconds*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. USA, First National Pictures, 1932. Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 9.

and GW Bitzer with restricted lighting in *A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909).[80] De Mille referred to this technique as 'Rembrandt lighting', suggesting an artistic foundation quite distinct from that of German Expressionism.[81] Vernet thus proposes that the kind of high contrast visual style associated with film noir has been typical in Hollywood since at least 1915, and gives striking examples of eminently "noir" nocturnal scenes in *The Big Gamble* (1931) and *The Penguin Pool Murder* (1932).[82] The effect of Vernet's observations is indeed to reveal the lack at the very heart of the hegemonic definition of "noir as style" that originates with Schrader's 'Notes on Film Noir' (about which Vernet himself is rather complimentary). Schrader identifies film noir as a style characterised by compositional tension, low level lighting, oblique lines and fatalistic heavy shadows, which he explicitly compares to 'German expressionism,' and explains that this style was the result of the 'German influence:' the integration into Hollywood of the émigré 'masters of chiaroscuro.'[83] This basic historiographical and aesthetic assumption subtends the common understanding of film noir; as Naremore notes, 'the standard histories say that it originated in America, emerging out of a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German expressionism.'[84] Vernet's study, however, suggests that no such easy assumptions can be made about the determination of noir's perceived visual style. The hegemonic definition is thus found to be barred, lacking; it founders on the rock of the Real.

Vernet's third blow struck against the noir critical edifice is perhaps less decisive. His final lack concerns the "literary argument". Here Vernet attempts to undermine the other pillar of the "standard history" identified by Naremore: the connection between noir and hard-boiled fiction. He claims that the 'narrative and

[80] Ibid., p. 9. *A Drunkard's Reformation*. Dir. DW Griffith. USA, American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1909.
[81] Phil A. Koury, *Yes, Mr. De Mille* (New York: Putnam, 1959), p. 78.
[82] *The Big Gamble*. Dir. Fred Niblo. USA, RKO Pathé Pictures, 1931; *The Penguin Pool Murder*. Dir. George Archainbaud. USA, RKO Pictures, 1932.
[83] Schrader, 'Notes', pp. 63, 57 & 55.
[84] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 9.

emotional quality of the [film noir] story' cannot be explained by reference to hard-boiled detective fiction.[85] He identifies a number of difficulties: for example, the ten year gap between the emergence of the detective novels and film noir, and the further gap between Dashiel Hammett and Raymond Chandler; and the numerous films 'swept under the rug in order to attempt to maintain the artificial purity and isolation of *film noir*.'[86] With regard to the first point, Sheri Biesen has argued persuasively for the role of the Production Code in delaying the transition of major works of hard-boiled fiction from page to screen. Challenging and morally ambivalent texts such as James M Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* were rejected by the Breen Office when the studios showed interest in adapting them in the 1930s. Biesen shows that it was not until the mid-1940s that censorship standards were sufficiently relaxed for the adaptation of *Double Indemnity* to go ahead.[87] This was a watershed moment; following *Double Indemnity*, Cain's other embargoed stories – *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Mildred Pierce* (1945) – were adapted in the following years.[88] Both of these stories were set against the contemporaneous backdrop of the Depression but their scandalous content could not be allowed to be filmed for another ten years. In this case it appears to be Vernet's argument that is found *lacking*.

Furthermore, this has a bearing on Vernet's second objection; while it is true that the delimitation of the noir category can at times appear arbitrary, it is also true that some of the potentially "noir" films that Vernet suggests are unreasonably excluded from the category are qualitatively different from those that *are* included. Vernet asks, '[w]hy could not the first version of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, (...) directed in 1942 under the title *The Falcon Takes Over* [(1942)] by Irving Reis, be part of the

[85] Vernet, '*FN*ED', pp. 13-14.
[86] Ibid., p. 14.
[87] Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), pp. 99-101. As Biesen notes, hardboiled fiction flourished during the Depression but Hollywood could not follow suit in the 1930s because of the Production Code (p. 102). Literature was not subject to such censorship.
[88] *Mildred Pierce*. Dir. Michael Curtiz. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945.

set?'[89] The answer is that Reis' film has far more in common with the campy farce of *Satan Met a Lady* (1936) – an early adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*, but manifestly *not* considered a film noir – than it does with the cynicism and sadism of Dmytryk's 1944 version.[90] The films admitted to the "set of noir" are those that were able, it seems, to subvert the Production Code in their depiction of sex and violence rather than erase it in deference to the pressures of censorship.[91] Given this explanation, it seems that the second pillar of noir historiography in fact stands firmer than the first.

However, the historiography of noir is permeable – even flawed – in other respects. Vernet comments upon the shadow cast by the *Panorama* over noir since 1955. He suggests that it cannot be escaped as long as it remains the unquestioned foundation of the category.[92] In a similar spirit to Vernet's scepticism, Charles O'Brien's study of the usage of the term "*film noir*" in France points to a significant failing in the standard accounts of the category: an omission that has remained unexamined despite the volume of noir criticism. As was briefly highlighted in the previous chapter, O'Brien's study of the French film culture immediately preceding World War Two shows that the term did not originate in 1946 in response to a new tendency in Hollywood films; rather it was used as early as 1938 to describe the films now regarded as Poetic Realism. He contends that, 'the term *film noir* had a substantial history in France prior to the postwar period,' with the term appearing in film reviews written between January 1938 and September 1939.[93] All of O'Brien's examples emphasise the pejorative aspects of the term; "*noir*" has associations of immorality and scandal. For example, *Quai des brumes* is dubbed '[*u*]*n film noir, un film immoral et*

[89] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 14. *The Falcon Takes Over*. Dir. Irving Reis. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1942.
[90] *Satan Met a Lady*. Dir. William Dieterle. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1936.
[91] Later in his text, Vernet does in fact recognise the weakening of censorship as a determining factor in the distinction between pre and post-war films ('*FN*ED', p. 20). He does not, however, recognise the bearing this condition has upon his formulation of the "literary argument".
[92] See Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 2.
[93] O'Brien, 'Film Noir', p. 7.

*démoralisant* [a dark film, an immoral and demoralising film].'[94] He notes that this rhetoric of moral condemnation contrasts sharply with the post-war valorisation of film noir by critics such as Frank and Borde and Chaumeton.

O'Brien points to a certain blind spot in the post-war French discourse; some of the very same critics that had contributed to the condemnation of the French *noir* tradition – Frank included – were now celebrating the American *film noir*. Most significantly, O'Brien's study suggests the impact that this case of "forgetting" in post-war culture had upon the subsequent historiography of noir. He notes that Borde and Chaumeton's express aim was to investigate those works that critics had already designated as *noir*, which would seem to insist upon a study of Poetic Realism; however, as O'Brien states, 'Borde and Chaumeton not only applied the term to the American cinema but argued that it does *not* apply to the French films of the 1930s.'[95] This meant the exclusion of Carné and Duvivier from the story of the American film noir and, crucially, a misunderstanding of the significance of Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier's use of the term in 1946.

This is exemplified by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's introduction to *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, a key work in Anglophone criticism on noir. In a discussion of the antecedents and formation of film noir, they admit that it seems strange that a group of what they refer to as 'indigenous American films' was identified by a French term and explain that, '[t]his is simply because French critics were the first to discern particular aspects in a number of American productions initially released in France after World War Two.'[96] Although there is nothing "simple"

[94] Quoted in ibid., p. 10.
[95] O'Brien, 'Film Noir', p. 16.
[96] Silver and Ward, *Film Noir*, p. 1. Furthermore, Vincendeau's study of the work in Paris of prominent noir filmmakers such as Wilder, Siodmak and Lang prior to their arrival in Hollywood and the role of Poetic Realism in the formation of noir suggests significant problems for the notion, posited by Silver, of an "indigenous American form", and raises questions about what constitutes a national cinema that are beyond the scope of this study (See 'Noir is also a French Word' and see also Silver, 'Introduction', *FNR*, pp. 3-15 (p. 5)).

about this fact, as was seen in the previous chapter, this is the well-rehearsed, standard historiographical account of noir encouraged by the *Panorama* and it leads to the familiar discussion of Frank and Chartier. Silver and Ward evoke the critical milieu in 1946 with reference to Chartier's piece as 'a typical article (...) under the title: 'Americans are also making "noir" films' ['*Les Américains aussi font des films "noirs"*'].'[97] What O'Brien's work suggests here is a failure on the part of such historiography to interrogate the word "also/*aussi*" in Chartier's title. Apropos of O'Brien, should this "*aussi*" be read as "as well as we the French"? Lack of knowledge regarding the French tradition before and after the war and its relation to American film noir leads to the commonly found observation – noted in the first chapter – that, '[t]he actual invention of the term "film noir" is attributed to cineaste Nino Frank.'[98] This attribution is now found to be mistaken. The "*aussi*" functions then as a sort of signifier of the lack in the structure established by Silver and Ward; it signifies a point of failure in the conventional historiography.[99]

O'Brien makes no such attribution, instead offering a number of examples of usage in 1938 which insist that the term "*film noir*" was not coined by Frank in 1946. The established historiography is thus found to be flawed and a new understanding of noir proceeds from this gap. However, O'Brien's insights must also be qualified; Chartier does in fact refer to 'talk of a French school of *film noir*' but insists that *Quai des brumes* and *Hôtel du Nord* offer a 'glimmer of resistance to the dark side', whereas the American films are entirely without redemptive qualities.[100] Chartier's tone of moral condemnation thus resonates far more with *avant guerre* criticism, but his disapproval is directed towards the American films celebrated by his colleagues after the Liberation.

[97] Silver and Ward, *Film Noir*, p. 1.
[98] Ibid., p. 1.
[99] This is not, it should be clear, Lacan's formulation of the signifier of the lack in the Other, S(Ⱥ). Rather, it is an echoing of the Lacanian terminology in an effort to understand the relation between structure and failure/impossibility that is here presented.
[100] Chartier, *FNR2*, p. 23.

Here Vernet perhaps sheds light upon the matter; he identifies the paradoxical role of America in post-war France as both liberator *and* occupier and describes the French reaction to a perceived American cultural imperialism that would 'replace red wine with whiskey, Marcel Proust with the dime detective novel, and 'Les Temps des cerises' with jazz.'[101] He recounts the French Communist Party's ferocious opposition to anything American, and moral outrage in the face of the 'disturbed perversions' of a film such as *Gilda*, which situate Chartier's article in a cultural climate more complicated than Silver and Ward, or even O'Brien describe.[102] Chartier's "*aussi*" thus functions almost as a double point of failure; it is the rock upon which both accounts in some sense stumble. It signifies both a link to pre-war French filmmaking of which the conventional historiography of noir was unaware *and* the presence of a sentiment in post-war criticism more closely aligned with the *avant guerre* tradition than O'Brien acknowledges.[103]

[101] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 5.
[102] Ibid., p. 5.
[103] Furthermore, O'Brien's treatment of the American film noir is less nuanced than that his treatment of the French *noir*; he accepts the American category as monolithic while describing the French films as a 'less homogeneous corpus' ('Film Noir', p. 7).

### 3. The Lack in the Critical Other

It thus becomes apparent that such critiques are, of course, themselves susceptible to critique and there is a danger here of disappearing along a hermeneutic spiral, but it should be remembered that this is Lacan's key lesson: *every* structure is founded upon lack, the big Other is *always* barred. It is important therefore to understand all the implications of Lacan's matheme ($\not{A}$) for the constitution of the critical category "film noir", which includes an interrogation of Vernet's first lack – the constructionist account of noir – and identification of the point(s) of failure within the very theoretical edifice put forward in the previous chapter. The question arises of what is *missing* from such an account. Emphasis on the role of France and French criticism leaves the American tradition under-appreciated: the conditions of production and reception of noir in America are a vital element in the understanding of the formation of noir. With recourse to the Graph, this suggests a shift in focus from the vector $\underset{S_2.S_1}{\longrightarrow}$ (the retroactive critical discourse) to the vector $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$ (the progressive unfolding of contingent historical conditions). This consideration is already contained in the bi-directionality of *Nachträglichkeit* described in Chapter 1 and points to the necessity of involving such a dimension in the critical understanding of the construction of noir.

The historical, political, economic, social, technological, industrial determinants of American noir are well-documented.[104] They present themselves as an array of contingent events and developments across the spectrum of American life: from the Depression and hardboiled fiction to World War Two's innumerable effects on the economy and social structure and the Cold War's reframing of American politics, all of which are considered to be crucial in the formation of the classic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s; new lenses and coatings, faster film stock and smaller, more mobile cameras

[104] See Spicer's *Film Noir* for a good overview of these various factors (pp. 1-24 & 27-44).

facilitated the high-contrast and extreme angles of noir cinematography; changes in the way studios sold and exhibited films led to an increase in low budget B movies, to which the production of cheap and simple urban crime films lent itself.[105] The relative importance of each given factor has been and continues to be a subject of debate. For example, Richard Maltby is critical of any 'Zeitgeist theory of film as cultural history' that suggests a phenomenon such as film noir is the direct reflection or creation of a general American cultural condition: a theory proffered in its most explicit articulation by Kracauer.[106] Thomas Elsaesser notes that the broad range of determinants identified in the historiography of noir is remarkable in that 'never have so many causes explained so few effects.'[107] An interesting way in which these conditions could be negotiated is suggested by the Althusserian orientation of Paul Kerr's discussion of the emergence of the B film noir; he approaches the emergence of noir with a nuanced understanding of the 'Hollywood superstructure model' and its 'relative autonomy from the economic base.'[108] This suggests a broader understanding of the determination of film noir in terms of Althusser's model of *overdetermination* and the complex interdependence of multiple, often seemingly opposing factors, determined "in the last instance" by the economic exigencies of the film industry.[109]

What is perhaps most pertinent to the discussion of noir as a critical category is the treatment of "noir" films in the American cinematic discourse of the time. Naremore has suggested that the classic film noir was 'a type of film for which Hollywood itself

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[105] Indeed, on even slighter contingencies are entire careers founded: prominent noir actor Ida Lupino (*High Sierra* (1941), *Road House* (1948), *On Dangerous Ground* (1952)) had such an uneasy relationship with her studios that she felt compelled to move behind the camera in early 1950s. Her work with Edmond O'Brien on *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953) and *The Bigamist* (1953) made her the first female director of the classic noir period.

[106] Maltby, 'Politics', p. 41. This chimes with Vernet's criticism of the vast over-simplifications of Raymond Durgnat, who suggested, 'Late '40s Hollywood is blacker than '30s precisely because its audience, being more secure, no longer needed cheering up' ('Paint', p. 37). Cf. Vernet, '*FN*ED', pp. 14 & 29n30.

[107] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 423. Elsaesser's approach to noir will be explored in the next chapter.

[108] Paul Kerr, 'Out of What Past? Notes on the B *film noir*', *FNR*, pp. 107-127 (p. 109).

[109] See Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 87-128.

had no name.'[110] This is both true and untrue: the American cinematic discourse had no *name*, singular, for these films; rather, it had an overabundance of names. As was observed in Chapter 1, Lloyd Shearer offered a multitude of signifiers to describe noir films.[111] This was matched by *New York Times* film reviewer Bosley Crowther, who provided similarly myriad descriptors for films such as *Stranger on the Third Floor*, a confused and pretentious 'murder mystery;' *The Maltese Falcon*, a 'sophisticated crime film;' *Gilda*, a 'moody love story;' and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 'a sternly moral picture' and a 'crime and punishment saga.'[112] One "name" does emerge in this account, however: that of "melodrama". Crowther calls *This Gun for Hire*, 'melodrama, straight and vicious;' *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*, 'tough melodrama;' and *The Killers*, 'mere movie melodrama.'[113] This is not novel vocabulary of course; it situates such films within an already-existing discourse.[114]

Siegfried Kracauer appears as the exception that proves the rule; as was noted in Chapter 1, in 1945 he *did* coin a new term – the "Hollywood terror film" – but it did not enter the contemporaneous critical discourse.[115] Naremore suggests that (*pace* Kracauer), '[r]eviewers made vague connections but no-one tried to invent a new term.'[116] However, recent noir scholarship has attempted to show that there *was* an original, domestic, unifying term for the classic film noir. In *Blackout*, Biesen makes the striking suggestion that the American discourse *did* have a name for these films: the 'red meat crime cycle.'[117] Her argument is based on an article by Fred Stanley, a

[110] Naremore, 'Season', p. vii.
[111] See Shearer, 'Crime Certainly Pays', pp. 9-10.
[112] Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times*, 2 September 1940; 4 October 1941; 15 March 1946; 3 May 1946.
[113] Crowther, *The New York Times*, 14 May 1942; 7 September 1944 & 9 March 1945; 29 August 1946.
[114] It is also a "name" in fact identified by Naremore himself in *MTN*; see his lengthy discussion of modernism and "blood melodrama", pp. 40-95.
[115] See Kracauer, 'Hollywood's Terror Films', p. 132. Perhaps Kracauer's coinage remained in the pages of *Commentary* because it did not chime with an American self-image in the way that "*film noir*" did for the New Hollywood in the 1970s.
[116] Naremore, *MTN*, pp. 16-17.
[117] Biesen, *Blackout*, p. 2.

journalist for the *The New York Times*, entitled 'Hollywood Crime and Romance' and published on 19 November 1944. It begins:

> HOLLYWOOD, according to present indications, will depend on so-called 'red meat' stories of illicit romance and crime for a major share of its immediate non-war dramatic productions: The apparent trend toward such material, previously shunned for fear of censorship, is traced by observers to Paramount's successful treatment of the James M. Cain novel, 'Double Indemnity', which was described by some producers as 'an emancipation for Hollywood writing'.[118]

This is a fascinating discovery on Biesen's part; it could suggest the need for a wholesale rethinking of the critical category of film noir. It is potentially more radical even than Vernet's deconstruction of noir in that it seems to undo the damage done by the constructionist critique and restores to noir its status as the American art form described by Silver and Ward. It would seem to be a triumph for the integrity of the classic American film noir, and signify the ultimate point of failure of the meta-critical account of noir given in Chapter 1. This is, however, not the case. The evidence produced by Biesen to substantiate the claims that, 'the American film industry and domestic press recognised these *noir* pictures as a growing movement before they were formally acclaimed in France in 1946,' and that, '[b]y 1944 Hollywood studio publicity and critics in the United States had already identified these innovative films as a bold new trend' is altogether unsatisfactory. Given the wealth of archive research evidently carried out by Biesen, it is surprising to find only four examples of this usage are cited and to realise that, on closer inspection, only two of these instances explicitly invoke the term, "red meat". Beside Stanley's piece, there is a 1945 review of *Conflict* (1945), which notes 'no scarcity of red meat' but beyond this, Biesen can summon only a letter from Joseph Breen that describes *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as 'strong meat' and a vague allusion to the Warner Bros. pressbook for *Casablanca* (1942).[119] While the

[118] Fred Stanley, 'Crime and Romance in Hollywood', *The New York Times*, 19 November 1944.
[119] *Conflict*. Dir. Curtis Bernhardt. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945; *Casablanca*. Dir. Michael Curtiz. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1942. Biesen, *Blackout*, pp. 176, 120 & 195. Biesen also cites an article (Paul Jensen, 'Film Noir: The Writer, Raymond Chandler: The World You Live In', in *Film Comment*, 20

1945 review from a Los Angeles newspaper *does* indicate usage of the term outside of Stanley's original article, this is not the widespread and deep-running American critical tradition that Biesen evokes.[120] Her argument is not simply *based on* the Stanley piece but appears almost *limited to* the Stanley piece. It is founded upon Stanley's use of the term "so-called" and his journalistic references to "observers". This language does indicate usage of the phrase "red meat" beyond the article in some way, but no more can be said than this. These two words cannot support such a grand claim about the American critical discourse. Biesen's study cannot be understood to constitute a fault in the noir universe in the way that Vernet's does; it is itself found to be lacking.

Could Hollywood itself provide the sort of foundations – that would, paradoxically, *unfound* some major assumptions about noir – sought by Biesen? A series of interviews conducted by the prominent American noir critics (Silver, Porfirio, Ursini) with significant filmmakers associated with the classic period in fact reveal an almost uniform unease on the part of these filmmakers when faced with the signifier "noir". Fritz Lang admitted his own lack of understanding of the term; he stated of his anti-Nazi thriller, *Man Hunt* (1941), 'I don't know if this is what you would call *film noir*. There are some scenes at night in the fog that are much like the way that [Robert] Siodmak liked to shoot. But for me that was just the setting.'[121] Samuel Fuller professed that, '[w]hen I was making these damned pictures, I never knew about *film noir*.'[122] When the potential noir-ness of his films was put to Billy Wilder, he insisted that, 'I would hope that all my pictures are different. To repeat oneself is boring (...). We didn't

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(1974), 18-26) by way of corroboration but, again, this piece is based entirely on Stanley's 1944 article (p. 232).

[120] Further exploration of the newspaper archives does reveal a second piece by Stanley, an end of year round up, that reiterates his assertion regarding '"red meat" stories' (*The New York Times*, 31 December 1944), and a markedly earlier piece on the production of *This Gun for Hire* that notes a 'slight trend toward red-meat pictures' (Douglas W Churchill, *The New York Times*, 12 October 1941) but little else. Stories in the 1940s about "red meat" in *The LA Times*, for example, are concerned with catering and agriculture rather than the cinema.

[121] *Man Hunt*. Dir. Fritz Lang. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1941. Silver and Porfirio, 'Interview with Fritz Lang', *FNR3*, pp. 51-65(p. 52).

[122] Porfirio and James Ursini, 'Interview with Samuel Fuller', *FNR3*, pp. 39-49 (p. 42).

set out to make a particular style of film.'[123] He also sought to confound the category, suggesting that '*Caligari* was a *film noir*, as you would call it. But certainly I would also think *Oedipus* is a play *noir*, right?'[124] The composer Miklós Rózsa was equally doubtful; he replied, 'I'll take your word for that. But what exactly do you mean by the term *film noir*?' to Robert Porfirio's suggestion that he had 'written far more film noir scores than any other composer.'[125] Edward Dmytryk was particularly hostile towards the critical categorisation of his work; he said, '[o]f course, the French have a great penchant for this kind of categorizing, for putting names which are so ridiculous (...) I've had the damndest things attributed to me,' and continued, 'I really violently object to that (...) I have a particular hatred for creating new vocabularies.'[126] It thus becomes clear that the key figures in the creation of noir had little or no understanding of the critical category until it was put to them some thirty years after the fact. This is unsurprising given the genesis of the category on a different continent and in a foreign language.[127]

There was, however, one filmmaker who appeared comfortable with this French appellation; Robert Aldrich, it seems, was in possession of the *Panorama* in the mid 1950s. Alain Silver has published a photograph of the director with the question, '[w]hy did Robert Aldrich (...) pose with a copy of the first edition [of] Borde and Chaumeton's book (in which he is not even mentioned) as he stood on the set of *Attack!* in 1956?'[128] Naremore wonders too what kind of signal the director was trying to send: 'Perhaps Aldrich was trying to tell us something about his work – or perhaps he was merely acknowledging the fact that Borde and Chaumeton greatly admired his previous picture,

[123] Porfirio, 'Interview with Billy Wilder', *FNR3*, pp.101-119 (p. 104).
[124] Ibid., p. 103.
[125] Porfirio, 'Interview with Miklós Rósza', *FNR3*, pp. 163-176 (p. 163).
[126] Porfirio, 'Dmytryk', *FNR3*, p. 27.
[127] The emergence of the signifier "noir" in the Anglo-American tradition in the 1970s will be explored in chapters 3 and 4.
[128] *Attack!*. Dir. Robert Aldrich. USA, Associates & Aldrich Company, 1956. Silver, 'Introduction', *FNR*, p. 10.

*Kiss Me Deadly*.'[129] However, this cannot be the case: Aldrich was holding a copy of the original French edition of the *Panorama*, which, spanning the years 1941 to 1953 contains no reference to his 1955 film. It was only in the 1979 Postface that Borde and Chaumeton designate *Kiss Me Deadly* as the 'fascinating and sombre conclusion' to the noir cycle.[130] This is then an instance of a Lacanian missed encounter: it is impossible to be sure of Aldrich's intentions in posing for the photo. What *can* be discerned is the effect of this photograph in the structure of critical discourse; it provides another fault line, another point of failure in the overarching noir critical narrative. Despite the manifest absence of this signifier in the American discourse concerning these films of the 1940s and 1950s, there *was* awareness of the French tradition at least somewhere; this raises a larger question of self-reflexivity in Hollywood with relation to the films associated with the category of noir.

One significant point of American noir self-reflexivity is imitation; as Borde and Chaumeton note, 'film noir wouldn't form a series worthy of the name if it hadn't given rise, in Hollywood itself, to various parodies.'[131] A particularly interesting example of this self-reflexivity is Bob Hope's hardboiled crime spoof, *My Favorite Brunette* (1947).[132] Modelled after Hope's earlier Hitchcock parody, *My Favorite Blonde* (1942), this film blends "noir" features with the studio-based comedy and showed, as Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* noted, 'Paramount knows a good thing when it sees one, especially when it earns a pile of bucks.'[133] By the summer of 1946 – when Hope shot this film – the dark cinema of Wilder, Dmytryk and company had reached a sufficient level of popularity and uniformity to suggest the viability of such an imitation. Silver and Ward observe, '[t]here is very little to laugh at in noir films. As a

[129] *Kiss Me Deadly*. Dir. Robert Aldrich. USA, Parklane Pictures Inc., 1955. Naremore, *MTN*, p. 4.
[130] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 155.
[131] Ibid., p. 122. Minelli's *Band Wagon* also presents a noir parody dance number.
[132] *My Favorite Brunette*. Dir. Elliott Nugent. USA, Hope Enterprises, 1947.
[133] *My Favorite Blonde*. Dir. Sidney Lanfield. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1942. Crowther, *The New York Times*, 20 March 1947.

result the cycle invites parodies,' and *My Favorite Brunette* takes up this invitation enthusiastically.[134] The film is narrated as a first person flashback "confessional" from death row at San Quentin prison, and the story initiated by an exotic woman entering a private detective's office. The script is filled with mock hardboiled dialogue and contains a throwaway reference to *The Lost Weekend*. It features Peter Lorre as Kismet, a parody of his villainous screen persona, and mixes a few low-key lit scenes of intrigue and suspense with the standard Hope comedy high-key visual style. A review in *Variety* recognised these now apparently stock figures, noting '[o]ne long flashback is the device employed' and identifying 'that familiar lawbreaker, Peter Lorre;' the piece concludes, 'it's familiar stuff but still grist for the yock mills.'[135] The most strikingly self-referential instance is an early scene in which Hope's character enters the private eye's office next door to his studio, musing that, 'All my life I wanted to be a hardboiled detective like Humphrey Bogart or Dick Powell, or even Alan Ladd...'. It is interesting to note that Hope makes use of the literary term – "hardboiled" – while making a specifically cinematic joke with Alan Ladd himself making a self-parodic cameo appearance. This suggests that such a "cinematic joke" could be made in its own terms, based upon the Hollywood star system – indeed, Bing Crosby also makes an ironic cameo – but to make a joke based on the nature of film noir, Hope (or his screenwriters Jack Rose and Edmund Beloin) had to reach for a discourse beyond the cinematic context.

What then is the consequence of such a film, which appears to reflect the "noir" tradition in Hollywood before it was formalised as such? To shed some light upon this question, it is necessary to turn to Miller's 'Action of the Structure'. Speaking of the relation between the subject and structure, Miller suggests that 'the presence of an element that turns back on reality and perceives it, reflects it and signifies it' leads to a

[134] Silver and Ward, *Film Noir*, p. 392.
[135] Variety Staff, *Variety*, 1 January 1947.

general distortion of the whole structural economy.[136] The result of this distorting presence is – amongst other things – the production of an absence; the 'action of the structure comes to be supported by a lack.'[137] Is there not a similar effect here? *My Favorite Brunette* stands as a self-reflexive point in the cinematic structure of Hollywood; it turns back on the "hardboiled crime film" and perceives, reflects, signifies it. It could be considered a filmic attempt to define noir – to engage with the wider cinematic discourse through the process of filmmaking itself – if not *avant la lettre*, then concomitant with it; the film was shot during that summer of 1946 when "*noir*" was being discovered in Paris. This attempt at definition, to articulate a position in the symbolic structure of Hollywood *from within* this structure, entails a lack. The film is situated by a signifier from another discourse – "hardboiled" – but there is no metalinguistic point outside of discourse as such that could itself situate these structures; the locus of the Other is thus found lacking.[138] A "noir" parody is therefore an attempt to symbolise "noir"; it is an act of cinematic criticism in and of itself. Naremore concurs on this point; he suggests that, 'much like analytic criticism, parody helps to define and even create certain styles, giving them visibility and status.'[139] Parody transforms "noir" into an idea that can circulate in the cinematic discourse; thus, both parody and criticism give shape to the popular conception of film noir.

This popular conception, however, is so utterly fraught with contradiction, pock-marked and fissured to the point of disintegration by critiques such as Vernet's that it is tempting to despair, and conclude with Silver that Vernet 'offers a void, a *noir* hole where there once was a body of films.'[140] It seems necessary to admit that the game is up; sixty years of film criticism have been in vain because, *film noir doesn't exist*. There

[136] Jacques-Alain Miller, '*Action de la structure*', *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, 9, no. 6 (1968), 93-105 (p. 95).
[137] Ibid., p. 95.
[138] This is not in fact the lack that Miller articulates in '*Action*'; rather Miller's formulation is taken here as a point of departure, a means of returning the lack in the Other.
[139] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 201.
[140] Silver, 'Introduction', *FNR*, p. 6. Elsaesser also suggests, 'film noir has no essence, (...) its most stable characteristic is its absent-centeredness' (*WCA*, p. 423).

are, however, possibilities suggested by a Lacanian understanding of the debate between Silver and Vernet that point to a way of moving forward with the understanding of film noir: firstly in Silver's reference to the void and a properly psychoanalytical engagement with the statement, "film noir doesn't exist", and secondly in Vernet's reference to the "set" of noir and the possibility of adding one film more to this set, which would seem to correspond to Miller's suggestion of 'the possibility of one signifier more.'[141]

[141] Miller, 'Suture', p. 33.

## 4. Approaching the Real (*Encore*)

To continue with this investigation of noir, it will be necessary to observe a crucial distinction in the Lacanian theory of the Real highlighted by Charles Shepherdson in *Lacan and the Limits of Language*: it is possible to distinguish 'two versions of the real,' a pre-symbolic Real and a post-symbolic Real.[142] As Shepherdson notes, the Real is a difficult concept that appears in several guises throughout the development of Lacan's thought. Indeed, this is – if such a statement is not too precarious – the very essence of the Real; it is that which is impossible to symbolise, and so, to approach it through language, many approaches must be taken (trauma, failure, impossibility, the matheme, *lalangue*) in an attempt to sketch out the space where the Real would be found.

The pre-symbolic Real appears as a primordial reality: the realm of existence that precedes the intervention of the signifier. It is the Real "out-there" which is lost with the advent of the Symbolic order; recall Lacan's Kojèvean-inspired declaration that 'the symbol firsts manifests itself as the killing of the thing.'[143] The intervention of the Symbolic bars access for the subject to this unmediated Real, which exists as a brute materiality prior to the signifier; again, recall from Chapter 1 the "letter" which precedes the signifier as a substratum that is 'always and in every case in its place.'[144] It is a sort of being-in-itself that can only reach consciousness through the mediations of representation. It is then absent because it is inaccessible. As this always-already "missed encounter", this pre-symbolic Real evokes also the traumatic intrusion of tuché as something *from the outside*; an unsymbolisable and disruptive element entering the Symbolic. Such a formulation of a pre-symbolic Real invites a conceptualisation of the

[142] Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), p. 27. Bruce Fink suggests that the origin of this distinction is Miller's class, *Orientation lacanienne*; the highly influential – yet largely unpublished – series that appears to inform most contemporary understanding of Lacan (*Lacanian Subject*, p. 182n11).
[143] Lacan, 'Function', p. 262.
[144] Lacan, 'Purloined', p. 16.

relation between the Symbolic and the Real in terms of Euclidean space, as realms that could be mapped by simplistic notions of, for example, inside and outside. Indeed, Lacan's designation of tuché as a real 'beyond *automaton*, the insistence of the signs' is, as Roberto Harari notes, a 'risky statement' because it invites a conception of the Real in terms of Kant's *Ding an Sich*: the noumenal, inapprehensible *thing* behind all phenomena.[145] This would then fall back into traditional questions regarding the reality outside the Symbolic, of the possibility of achieving a "full" existence beyond the limitations of the signifier. As Shepherdson acknowledges, there is some textual basis for this characterisation of the Real in Lacan's work, particularly in the earlier stages; however, Shepherdson concludes that, conceptually, this first formulation must be rejected as inadequate to the task of approaching the Real, and demonstrates how the second formulation – the post-symbolic Real – presents a more nuanced rendering of the problematic of the Real.[146]

To present an example from the realm of noir criticism, Dale Ewing's article '*Film Noir*: Style and Content' gives voice to this pre-symbolic Real in its approach to the ontology of film noir. Ewing contends that, 'the term *film noir* has been applied too loosely to give us an accurate definition of the subject,' which he attempts to prove through a meta-critique of the literature on film noir.[147] So far so good, it may seem; Ewing appears as another brave soul who deserves admission to Vernet's pantheon of critics who dare to say that "film noir has no clothes". However, Ewing continues, and it is here that the situation changes. He states,

> a particular film cannot be defined as *film noir* because it reflects one aspect or several aspects of the *film noir* spirit; it has to reflect every aspect of the *film noir* spirit or it is something other than *noir*. [148]

[145] Lacan, *S11*, pp. 53-54; Harari, *Fundamental Concepts*, p. 100. No such topography is possible, however; this relation must be conceived *topologically*.
[146] See Shepherdson, *Limits*, pp. 29 & 34.
[147] Dale E Ewing, Jr, '*Film Noir*: Style and Content', *FNR2*, pp. 73-84 (p. 73).
[148] Ibid., p. 73.

To comply with Ewing's declaration would mean that *there would be no films noirs whatsoever*. Any given definition of film noir would exclude, in some respect, those films most commonly heralded as the very quintessence of the category: *Double Indemnity* has no private detective; *Gilda* ends with the elimination of the villain and the union of the hero with the femme fatale; *The Big Sleep* has a studio look; in *The Maltese Falcon* Spade is as sentimental as he is tough. Again, this might appear to chime with the deconstruction of the category of noir and the limitations of the function of definition explored below, but it is Ewing's assertion that 'a *film noir* cannot be defined adequately until the movie in question is evaluated as a complete work,' that this "film noir spirit" can be captured, which indicates a reliance on the pre-symbolic.[149] It is as if Ewing believes that, with enough labour, the Symbolic could adequately render the Real; if he can meta-critique a sufficient number of texts on noir and view enough noir films he can go beyond the limitations of the signifier and apprehend a sort of film-noir-in-itself. Ewing strives for an essentialist definition of noir that relies on what could be considered, in Lacanian terms, a *psychotic totality*.[150] This is not to diagnose Ewing himself; rather it points to the structure at work in his article and the approach to film noir that it suggests. If the clinical structure of neurosis is characterised by gaps, faults, the very lack in the Other (the topology of the cross-cap, for example), then psychosis – in particular, paranoia – involves a full and complete Other in which nothing is lacking and everything is explained (the topology of a sphere). There is a 'lack of a lack:' the pure plenitude of the Real.[151] Ewing's article seems to express the

[149] Ibid., p. 73.
[150] There is perhaps scope to argue that Ewing's approach instead be considered *perverse*, relying upon a fantasy of the pre-symbolic Real where the Other is not lacking. Ewing *does* attempt a definition through "style and content", so this might seem a case of "*Je sais bien, mais quand même...*" There is, however, no acknowledgement of the impossibility – no "I know very well" – to accompany the "but all the same..." effort to define. The discussion of definition in the next chapter will explore a similarly fetishistic, "as if" mode of discourse, which does not, however, insist upon a totalising "spirit". (Cf. Octave Mannoni, 'I Know Well, but All the Same', in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. by Dennis Foster, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), pp. 68-92.)
[151] Miller, '*Action*', p. 102. Moreover, Lacan states that 'the real is full' (*Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d'objet*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1994), p. 218).

structure of a delusion of absolute mastery; it aims to constitute film noir as a totality in which every aspect of the film noir spirit is reflected.[152]

Furthermore, there is, in Ewing's insistence that the Symbolic could capture the Real, what Žižek describes as a confusion of the 'order of "words" and the order of "things", which, precisely, is the most elementary and succinct definition of psychosis.'[153] Like Lacan's madman – the king that believes he truly is a king, that his symbolic mandate is indexed to his being – Ewing's text expresses a belief that the "adequate definition" of noir would capture noir itself; it would correlate to noir's very being. Ewing's simple assertion that '*film noir* means "black film"' suggests that the act of rendering the term into English is sufficient to explain the phenomenon; this forecloses what Žižek calls 'the radical contingency of naming.'[154] He suggests that such instances of naming take the form of a tautology: 'a name refers to an object because this object is called that – this impersonal form ("it is called") announces the dimension of the "big Other".'[155] The signifier must therefore sustain itself. As Lacan notes, in the locus of the Other '[n]o authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus.'[156] In other words, there is no metalanguage, no Other of the Other; the signifier must act as its own guarantee. It is the naming itself that constitutes its reference retroactively. It is only the signifier "*film noir*" that supports the identity of the object "film noir". Any French-to-English dictionary will show that "*film noir* means black film" but it will explain nothing of the films themselves. Tracing the signifier back to its origin will reveal only the contingent emergence of the name "film noir" itself; the retroactive naming, the

[152] There are some resonances here with Althusser's reading of Hegel that perhaps deserve further exploration.
[153] Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 274.
[154] Ewing, '*Film Noir*', p. 73; Žižek, *SOI*, p. 92.
[155] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 93.
[156] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 688.

constituting gesture made in 1946. To emphasise the utter contingency of the signifier involved, the case of Italian film noir should be considered: as Mary P Wood explains, the films of the Italian cinema that would correspond to those designated as "noir" in Hollywood are referred to as "*giallo*" or "yellow" films because the Italian publisher Mondadori printed its detective fiction in books with yellow covers.[157] These films are no less dark but they are "*giallo*" rather than "*noir*"; a different historical constellation resulted in a different signifier.

Ewing's insistence on definition pushes it to its breaking point, and perhaps suggests an inherent limit or fault in the Symbolic that points towards the second conception of Lacan's Real: the post-symbolic. At first, Lacan's discussion of *das Ding* in *Seminar VII* would appear to be the most explicit formulation of this pre-symbolic, pre-discursive noumenal beyond; it is the prehistorical and unknowable absolute Other that 'was there from the beginning.'[158] However, Lacan suggests that this primordial field of *das Ding* is a 'void at the centre of the real,' an 'excluded interior.'[159] It is not simply "out there", it is somehow "in here", present as a gap. As suggested above, the relation between the Real and the Symbolic cannot then be conceptualised in terms of a straightforward inside and outside; instead a topological relation is required. What Lacan describes as 'the central place, as the intimate exteriority or "extimacy," that is the Thing' can be expressed by the topology of the torus: a form constructed around a central void, whose "inside is outside" because its centre of gravity falls outside its mass yet is within this structuring interior absence.[160] This "extimate" relation between the Symbolic and the Real expresses a void within the structure; the Real should not be considered an external entity but rather *excluded from within*. It appears as an internal

[157] Mary P Wood, 'Italian film noir', in *European Film Noir*, ed. by Andrew Spicer (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), pp. 236-272 (p. 236). Interestingly, Wood reflects upon the difficulty of defining the "*giallo*" or Italian noir; it appears as radically heterogeneous and unstable as its American counterpart.
[158] Lacan, *S7*, p. 83.
[159] Ibid., p. 121 & 101.
[160] Ibid., p. 139.

point of failure or an inherent limit. This recalls the crucial qualification of trauma as *Nachträglichkeit*; it is not simply the sudden intrusion that disrupts the Symbolic but the retroactive movement of the signifier that determines this intrusion as such as traumatic. The Real thus appears as an *effect* of the Symbolic. This presents a paradox whereby, as Žižek, observes, 'the Real as external, excluded from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination — what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the inherent point of failure of symbolization.'[161] Indeed, any conception of the pre-symbolic Real can only be a post-symbolic determination; it is a left-over, the *caput mortuum* of the Symbolic.[162] Recalling once again the coin toss game, it is an impossibility generated by the signifier.

Thus, the Real *qua* post-symbolic is an internal limit rather than an external boundary (which would be a pre-symbolic Real). It is therefore possible to situate the version of the Real *qua* point of failure presented earlier in the chapter: the Other was deemed to be lacking in part because it stumbled over some external obstacle – the rock of the Real – that caused it to fail. This is what Žižek calls 'the anamorphic view of the Real;' the impossible is distorted so that it appears as a form of boundary.[163] Lacan is precise, however, in his formulation: 'the real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the real emerges from.'[164] The Real manifests itself as an internal, logical limit. The impossible-Real is thus not the opposite of the possible, instead the post-symbolic effect is such that the

[161] Žižek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!', in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, pp. 90-135 (p. 121). The pre-symbolic can only be assumed as a post-symbolic myth; something constructed retroactively to explain the presence of the signifier.
[162] This paradox is embodied by Lacan's *objet a*: both a void *and* an excess, a post-symbolic product that provides a semblant of the pre-symbolic Thing, the *petit a* is both object and cause of desire.
[163] Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 165.
[164] Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis 1969-70, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller*, trans. by Russell Grigg (London: Norton, 2007), p. 123.

"impossible happens"; as Lacan notes, '[t]he real is distinguished (...) by the fact that its economy (...) admits something new, which is precisely the impossible.'[165]

To this end, the lack in the Other must be reconsidered: it can be calculated logically from what is known about the signifier. As Skriabine observes, '[t]he fault in the universe, in the universe of the signifier (...) is based on this: that the signifier is only defined by difference.'[166] The signifier is nothing but a differential element; it is defined only by its difference from other signifiers, and it therefore 'is in the nature of each and every signifier not to be able in any case to signify itself.'[167] The Symbolic order is thus made up of a collection of non-self-identical elements and Lacan insists that, 'insofar as the battery of signifiers is it is complete,' which is to say that these signifiers constitute a set.[168] However, the question arises as to whether this set of non-self-identical signifiers can form a totality and this leads to a logical problem, Lacan suggests, comparable to Russell's paradox, or 'the set of all elements which are not members of themselves, $X \notin X$.'[169] Signifiers *qua* non-self-identical can be compared to sets that are "not members of themselves" and the big Other is thus the set of all such elements. The big Other, (A), itself is then a paradox because '[e]ither it contains itself or it fails in its definition, or it does not contain itself and in that case it fails in its task.'[170] This is why Lacan writes it as barred, ($\not{A}$). The S($\not{A}$) – the *signifier* of the barred Other – could then be considered in an extimate relation to the big Other; it is contained as an interior exclusion and 'can be symbolized by the inherence of a (-1) in the set of signifiers.'[171] This suggests to Lacan 'the fact that language could not

[165] Lacan, *S11*, p. 167.
[166] Skriabine, 'Clinic', p. 79.
[167] Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIV: La logique du fantasme, 1966-1967*, unpublished manuscript. Session 11/16.1996.
[168] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 694.
[169] Lacan, 'Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever', in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, new edn, ed. by Eugenio Donato and Richard Macksey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007), pp. 186 – 204, (p. 193).
[170] Lacan, *S14*, 11/16/1996.
[171] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 694.

constitute a closed set [*un ensemble fermé*],' which he restates in typically aphoristic fashion as, 'there is no universe of discourse.'[172]

In this sense, each attempt to totalise the set of signifiers would engender another signifier, an ($A_1$) to signify the set that contains (A), an ($A_2$) to signify the set containing ($A_1$) *ad infinitum*. The "logic of the signifier" thus points to its inherent limit: the lack in the Other, which means the eternal possibility of *adding another signifier*. Lacan comes to formalise this deadlock of the Real ultimately in the logic of sexuation.[173] It has already been established that this project will not be a Lacanian exploration of sexual difference in film noir, and so this recourse to Lacan's theory of sexuation might seem out of place. However, as Russell Grigg argues, the theory of sexuation presents *logical* categories which therefore 'have no intrinsic link to the field of sexuality but are independent of it.'[174] In fact, Lacan himself points to such a possibility when he states that, '[t]he sexed being of these [not-all] women does not involve the body but what results from a logical exigency in speech;' sexuation does not entail biological differences but structural categories.[175]

Lacan's structures of sexuation are 'two ways to make the sexual relationship fail;' a masculine way and a feminine way; "masculine" and "feminine" structures are thus two modalities of failure.[176] In the terms of *Encore* they are two responses to the impossibility of the sexual relationship; however, in logical terms, these formulae can be read as two responses to Russell's paradox in the Symbolic order – the impossibility

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[172] Lacan, *S14*, 11/16/1996.
[173] In fact, as early as 1968 Lacan comments upon the logical impossibility in terms of the sexual relation: to state 'that man and woman ultimately have nothing to do with each other, is simply to mark a paradox (...) which is of the same order as the paradox of logic that I stated before you, it is of the same order as "I am lying" or Russell's paradox of the catalogue of all catalogues which do not contain themselves. It is the same dependence.' (*Le Séminaire XV: L'acte psychanalytique, 1967-1968*, unpublished manuscript. Session 27/03/68).
[174] Russell Grigg, *Lacan, Language & Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 82. Grigg adds that it is for this reason that the logic of sexuation can legitimately be applied to other fields. And furthermore, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan argues a similar point in *The Logic of Sexuation: from Aristotle to Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004).
[175] Lacan, *S20*, p. 10. On this point, Lacanian theory has its sceptics: see for example, Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993).
[176] Lacan, *S20*, p. 56.

of forming a totality from the big Other – that correspond to two types of sets. "Man" and "woman" are then but the names of these sets. In brief, the logical formulae for "man" render the paradox of the big Other in terms of incompleteness; it makes an "all" of the set of signifiers ($\forall x \Phi x$) predicated on an "exception that proves the rule" ($\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$). The masculine structure *does* make a universe of discourse but only on the basis of an excluded signifier; the (-1) inherent to the set becomes a marker of its incompleteness – which no subsequent signifier can fill – but allows the set to function as if it were closed.[177] Masculine sexuation thus suggests a "closed ontology" of noir that will be explored in the next chapter. The approach to noir here requires instead feminine sexuation and the set of "woman".

[177] As Lacan notes, '[t]he universe (...) succeeds in making the sexual relationship fail in the male manner' (*S20*, p. 56).

## 5. The Set of "Woman"

In order to take further Vernet's approach to noir, it will therefore be necessary to approach Lacan's theory of feminine structure.[178] Lacan characterises the set of "woman" with the formula '$\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$, a never before seen function in which negation is placed on the quantifier, which should be read as "not-whole" [*pas-tout*].'[179] A first point must be made here regarding this "*pas-tout*"; this concept must be read very carefully and understood in very specific terms. Both Russell Grigg and Bruce Fink comment upon the difficulty of rendering "*pas-tout*" in English. Grigg prefers to leave it untranslated so as to preserve to polysemy of the French term.[180] This is often best practice in relation to Lacanian terminology; the French terms – like mathemes – retain a specific theoretical designation in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. While he is perhaps the foremost translator and theorist of Lacan in the Anglophone tradition, Fink's solution is much less satisfactory; his translation of "pas-tout" into the English "not-whole" has profound theoretical implications. In a footnote to *Encore* he explains, '[*p*]*as toute*, and *pas-tout* (...), can, in certain instances, be rendered as "not all," but Lacan is not—in my view—primarily concerned here with quantity (all or some).'[181] However, a reading of Lacan's Seminar suggests that this *pas-tout* cannot be reduced to "not-whole"; indeed, *not-whole* would seem equally to indicate a quantification and a question of incompleteness not compatible with Lacan's formulation.[182] The "*pas-tout*" is not involved in a dialectic of all and some, or even part and whole, but quite literally as all and not-all. It is perhaps useful to consider this in terms of Žižek's discussion of the Kantian distinction between the negative and the indefinite judgement: a given

[178] See Appendix 2.
[179] Ibid., p. 72.
[180] Grigg, *Lacan*, p. 83.
[181] Fink, *S20*, p7n28.
[182] A distinction is required here between "incomplete" and "open" that will be explored below. It is the difference between translating "*pas tout*" as "not whole" (a "phallic" or "masculine" translation, based upon a notion of incompleteness) and "not all" (a "feminine" and "open" translation). As such, Fink's translation of "*pas-tout*" as "not-whole" will be modified throughout to read "not-all".

proposition – for example, "The soul is mortal" – can be modified in two ways. In the first case – the negative judgement – it can be negated: "The soul is not mortal". The predicate "mortal" is denied by the modifier "not". In the second case – the indefinite judgement – as Žižek describes: 'instead of negating a predicate (i.e., the copula which ascribes it to the subject), we affirm a certain non-predicate – "The soul is notmortal".'[183] Similarly then, the "not-all" should be considered the affirmation of a non-predicate; it is not a negative judgement regarding the all or even the whole but the insistence of a quality (rather than a quantity; *the quantifier is negated*) that is called *not-all*.

To return then to the formulae of sexuation, it should be remembered that the masculine set of all is so considered because it is *defined* by a limit that contains it. The universe of man is possible only on the condition that something be excepted from it; however, the same is not true for woman. Lacan suggests that there is no exception, no limit point or boundary to the feminine set that would constitute it as a universe. He explains that on the basis of $\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$, glossed as 'not-every (*pas-tout*) $x$ is inscribed in $\Phi x$,' it could be deduced that there must be some $x$ that contradicts $\Phi x$.[184] This would suggest an equivalence between $\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$ and $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$. However, this is not the case because the set is modified by a different existential proposition, $\overline{\exists x}\overline{\Phi x}$, that insists *there is no* $x$ that contradicts $\Phi x$. This is because the set of woman as not-all involves the infinite. Lacan explains that 'as soon as you are dealing with an infinite set, you cannot posit that the [not-all] implies the existence of something that is produced on the basis of negation.'[185] As a result, feminine structure is conceptualised in relation to a set that does not exist on the basis of constitutive exception. It is because 'there is no figure

[183] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), p. 108.
[184] Lacan, *S20*, p. 102-3. The translation "not-every" for "pas-tout" emphasises, in this instance, *how not to read the term*.
[185] Ibid., p. 103.

who founds a group of women: no woman [who] constitutes an exception to the rule' – no "primal mother" to partner the primal father for whom the Exception stands in relation to the universal set of man – that the set of woman cannot be considered in terms of the universal.[186] The universe of the masculine closed set of all can be considered in terms of the limiting function of signification; the point where signifier meets signified and meaning is produced. Conversely, the feminine open set of not-all is equivalent to the potentially infinite chain of signifiers, which is not determined by a limit and does not – in itself, without the introduction of an exception (recall the -1 of the set) – constitute a universe.

Furthermore, $\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$ should not be understood to suggest that because woman is "not all in the phallic function" that there is some part of the feminine subject that escapes the phallus. This is the fatal misreading that gives rise to the absolute mystification of woman as Other.[187] Rather $\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$ is to be considered in terms of the set, not a single subject; because there is no exception to the function $\Phi x$ ($\overline{\exists x}\overline{\Phi x}$, *there is no* $x$ *not subject to the phallic function*), woman as a set of not-all is subject to the function *without exception*. Woman as qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, *pas-tout* is subject to the function $\Phi x$: this is how $\overline{\forall x}\Phi x$ should be read. Woman relates to the big Other as a set of not-all (and *not* not-whole); she discerns the lack in the Other, that which renders it barred and renders her barred. The not-all thus correlates directly to ($\not A$) as the matheme for Lacan's statement, "there is no Other of the Other"; there is no exception, no transcendental point of guarantee. The set of woman is then, in Lacanian terms, an open set; or to put it another way, woman, in relation to the Symbolic order, is constituted as an open set.

[186] Serge André, *What Does Woman Want?*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 1999), pp. 242-243.
[187] In *S7*, Lacan renders this in terms of the association of woman with the Mother in relation to *das Ding* (pp. 35 & 67).

Lacan defines open sets as 'sets that exclude their own limits.'[188] It is obligatory at this point to note that this has been the source of much debate; in their critique of Lacan, Sokal and Bricmont insist that this is 'an incorrect definition of open set' and go on to suggest that such instances are indicative of wider abuse of mathematical and scientific terms and concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis.[189] While it is true that Lacan's terms do not correspond directly to the mathematical terms of set theory, what Lacan is establishing here is a *Lacanian theory of sets*. Lacan borrows mathematical terminology to construct a complex yet precise theory of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real, impossibility and sexuation.[190] It is not so much the relation between psychoanalysis and set theory as such that is of interest here, it is rather the work to which Lacan puts such terms in the theoretical elaboration of psychoanalysis itself. And it is here worth noting a possible point of contradiction; a set that "excludes its own limit" is in fact Lacan's definition of the set of all. This set is constituted by an element that is not contained within it; the exception is a limit point external to the set that confers upon it its closure. It is in fact *the lack of a limit* – understood as boundary rather than internal limit (it is in fact the *inherent limit* of the big Other, ($\not{A}$), that makes it not-all) – that characterizes the set of woman as open, that makes woman not-all. Lacan's description of a set that "excludes its own limit" is then in the sense that it is not delimited or defined; it is in the realm of the potentially infinite and cannot be saturated. Recall Lacan's insistence that an "infinite set" cannot be based on negation. To reiterate, there is no exception to the open set of woman: $\overline{\exists x}\overline{\Phi x}$. The set is open because it is not limited by some transcendental Other – some One – that would be $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$.

[188] Lacan, *S20*, p. 9.
[189] Sokal and Bricmont, *Intellectual*, p. 22.
[190] For a fully-realised engagement with set theory in the realm of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Bernard Burgoyne, 'Autism and Topology', in *Drawing the Soul: Schemas and Models in Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Bernard Burgoyne (London: Karnac Books, 2009), pp. 190-217.

It is for this reason that Lacan suggests, '*woman* does not exist, woman is [*not all*] (*pas toute*).'[191] Again, the French is more instructive here than the English: Lacan states that "*La femme n'existe pas*". Fink notes that the emphasis should be on the definite article "*La*", to indicate 'that Woman with a capital *W*, Woman as singular in essence, does not exist; Woman as an all-encompassing idea (a Platonic form) is an illusion. There is a multiplicity of women, but no essence of "Womanhood" or "Womanliness".'[192] Lacan is explicit in this regard; reflecting upon the formulae for feminine sexuation, he asks, What do they define? Answer:

> Woman precisely, except that Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. There's no such thing as Woman because (...) she is [not-all].[193]

Fink notes that he was compelled to modify the text in this instance to convey, in English, Lacan's insistence upon the definite article "*La*" as indicator of universality; Lacan writes a bar through it – ~~*La*~~ – to indicate this non-universalisability.[194] The open set will not allow for any such universality because it is not determined an exception (*that proves the rule*). Lacan suggests that as soon as the set of woman is determined as not-all 'it is improper to call her Woman (*La femme*), because (...) the W cannot be written. There is only barred Woman here.'[195] This is not a radically anti-feminist gesture; rather it is a question of definition. "*La femme n'existe pas*" or "Woman does not exist" does not mean that *women* do not exist; it means that there is no generalisable category or signifier within the Symbolic order capable of defining the set of woman.[196] As Joan Copjec suggests, the collectability of women is not 'imperilled by the external

[191] Lacan, *S20*, p. 7.
[192] Ibid., p. 7n28.
[193] Ibid., pp. 72-73.
[194] Ibid., p. 72n29. ~~*La*~~ thus comes to function as a matheme for the non-universalisable in the bottom half of the table.
[195] Ibid., p. 80.
[196] The formulation that follows is, in one sense, the Butlerian poststructuralist insistence on particularisation. It must, however, remain situated in an understanding of the Lacanian theory of sets here expounded.

collision of definitions' but by the lack in the very function of definition as such.[197] The open set is a plurality that cannot be generalised, universalised, or defined because the Symbolic order is itself not-all; there is no signifier that could render it whole. Instead of the One, this set must then be taken *one by one*: Lacan invokes the myth of Don Juan to suggest that even if 'there are *mille e tre* of them, it's clear that one can take them one by one – that is what is essential. That is entirely different from the One of universal fusion.'[198] The members of the open set are thus individual and particular, without totality or essence: women rather than Woman. They do not participate in a general category; their category is not-all, a potentially infinite series in an open set. The field cannot be universalised because there is no exception ($\overline{\exists x}\overline{\Phi x}$).[199]

Before returning to the question of noir, it will be necessary briefly to consider the implications of the open set for the Lacanian theory of language. As suggested above, the characterisation of the set of woman as not-all puts it into a relation, if not a direct correlation, with the lack in the Other; as Lacan notes, '[w]oman has a relation with S(Ⱥ), and it is already in that respect that (...) she is [not-all].'[200] This relation to the fault in the symbolic universe is indicated in the lower portion of the table where the non-universalisable $\not{La}$ is shown to be connected to the signifier of the lack in the Other, S(Ⱥ). This suggests a relation to the Symbolic order as lacking, a correlation between the not-all open set and the not-all chain of signifiers. What emerges from such a relation is Lacan's notion of *lalangue*; indeed, as he suggests in *Le Séminaire XXIII*, 'it is the set of women which generated what I called *lalangue*.'[201] The lower portion of the table relates, in Lacanian terms, to the type(s) of jouissance associated with the structuration identified in the upper portion of the graph; feminine jouissance is thus

[197] Copjec, *Read*, p. 225.
[198] Lacan, *S20*, p. 10.
[199] As such, it would be more correct to refer to the set of "women".
[200] Ibid., p. 81.
[201] Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2005), p. 117.

related to the barred Other. Indeed, *lalangue* can be formulated as the point at which the signifier and jouissance – heretofore mutually exclusive: 'jouissance is prohibited to whoever speaks' – are brought together.[202] As Jean-Claude Milner suggests, '[*lalangue*] enjoys.'[203] However, to continue the exploration here of sexuation in logical and structural terms, *lalangue* can be considered in terms of the impossible relation between the Symbolic and the Real, even as a formulation of a Real-in-the-Symbolic. The apparently external opposition between jouissance (*qua* Real) and the signifier (*qua* Symbolic) becomes, as Mladen Dolar observes, 'the internal split of language as such.'[204] The Real is "integrated" into the Symbolic 'in such a way that their divergence is what drives *lalangue*.'[205]

This Lacanian term "*lalangue*" – formed by the contraction of the French "*langue*" (language, in Saussure's sense of "language system") with its definite article "*la*" – is a conceptualisation of language as open, faulty, lacking. Lacan suggests that, '[o]ur recourse in llanguage (*lalangue*), is to that which shatters it (*le brise*).'[206] It is the impossible complex of language effects; the erratic, polysemous and equivocal effects of the signifier. The term itself is formed at the acoustic level where homophony gives rise to these ambiguities – "*la langue*" is acoustically indistinguishable from "*lalangue*". Fink suggests that it is 'the level at which language may "stutter".'[207] *Langue* derives from the Latin *lingua* or tongue; here, the tongue trips over the double phoneme "la-la", which Fink attempts to render into English with the neologism

[202] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 696.
[203] Jean-Claude Milner, *For the Love of Language*, trans. by Ann Banfield (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 131.
[204] Dolar, *Voice*, p. 144. Furthermore, to be clear: 'the Real *par excellence* is *jouissance*' (Žižek, *SOI*, p. 164).
[205] Dolar, *Voice*, p. 144. Dolar suggests that the signifier and jouissance thus exist in a relation expressed by the topology of the Möbius strip; 'the two are placed on the same surface separated merely by its inner torsion' (p. 145).
[206] Lacan, *S20*, p. 44.
[207] Ibid., p. 44n15.

"llanguage". *Lalangue* works at the level of wordplay and homonymy.[208] Indeed, Lacan's own later work is ever more densely populated with neologisms and puns, such as *lalangue*. Dolar notes that it is 'the concept of what in languages makes puns possible, and the very word *lalangue* is the first specimen of its kind.'[209] To recall the "purloined letters" from Chapter 1, *lalangue* is found in the play of the phoneme "rat" across *Ratten, Raten, Spielratte, heiraten* and the ambiguity of the "glance/shine on the nose". Puns and neologisms in psychoanalysis suggest new understanding and more nuanced theoretical constructions.

Lacan's *lalangue* refers to non-communicative aspects of language; it 'serves purposes that are altogether different from that of communication.'[210] The broken and equivocal language of *lalangue* refuses the transmission of meaning; it refuses to make sense because it is radically open. It is the failure of language itself, the very expression of the lack in the Other; there is no metalanguage that could render it complete. Lacan insists that, '[w]hat I put forward, by writing *lalangue* as one word, is that by which I distinguish myself from structuralism, insofar as the latter would like to integrate language into semiology.'[211] This recalls his "Gödelian structuralism"; it proceeds from the very gaps, breaks or faults within language itself. *Lalangue* is where the ticks and stutters of the signifier cause language to stumble; they are the inherent limitation of the Symbolic, the impossible-Real of the lack at the heart of the Other that renders it meaningless in its very profusion of potential meaning. *Lalangue* is not-all and so it relates to Truth: '[n]ot the whole truth, because there's no way to say it all. Saying it all is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it is through this very impossibility that the

[208] There are perhaps Derridean overtones to Lacan's notion of *lalangue*; see, for example, Michael Lewis' discussion in *Lacan and Derrida: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), pp. 205-220. However, Lewis claims that *lalangue* dissolves both the distinction between the Symbolic and the Real *and* the connection of language and the unconscious (see pp. 207-209). Lacanian theory is clear on both these points; both *lalangue* and the unconscious emerge as a result of the way in which the Symbolic is internally, inherently split by the Real.
[209] Dolar, *Voice*, p. 143.
[210] Lacan, *S20*, p. 138.
[211] Ibid., p. 101.

truth holds to the real.'[212] The impossibility of "saying it all", finding some final signifier that would render the open set of signifiers closed is the Lacanian Truth of *lalangue*, the way in which the Real inhabits the Symbolic order.[213]

[212] Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. by Joan Copjec, trans. by Dennis Hollier, et al. (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 3.

[213] There is a sense in which *lalangue* appears to correlate to the pre-symbolic Real as a chaotic and polysemous substrate from which language emerges. Recall the association between the pre-symbolic "letter" and *lalangue* noted above. Indeed, Lacan states explicitly, '[l]anguage is, no doubt, made up of *lalangue*. It is knowledge's hare-brained lucubration (*élucubration*) about llanguage' (*S20*, p. 139). What is of interest here, however, is how *lalangue* demonstrates the way in which the Real can inhabit the Symbolic as a post-symbolic and thus logical limit. The emphasis is, as indicated above, on *lalangue* as a manifestation of "the internal split of language as such".

## 6. A Topology of Noir (I)

The conclusion drawn above – that "film noir doesn't exist" – can now be understood in its properly Lacanian context. If Vernet's approach to noir *proceeds from a fault in the universe*, is it then possible to formulate a "topology of noir"? Vernet's suggestion that "there is always another film to add" seems to correspond to the condition of the barred Other, the lack that permits "the possibility of another signifier". As such, it might be possible to construct two ways of approaching the problem of noir that correlate to two modalities of failure – or two responses to the impossibility of totalisation – suggested by Lacan's theory of sexuation: a "masculine" way and a "feminine" way of forming a set. The intricacies of the masculine way will be explored in the next chapter; it should by now be apparent here that the feminine way correlates to Vernet's approach to the (de)construction of the category of noir.[214]

Just as Woman does not exist because the not-all, open set of woman will not allow for any universalisation, film noir – or perhaps more accurately here, Film Noir – does not exist because it is deemed to be not-all.[215] Like "Woman", the Symbolic (*qua* critical discourse) fails to constitute the existence of "Film Noir" as a defined or delimited set. In the absence of a limit point to the set – a metalinguistic point of reference that could grant closure – Copjec suggests, 'we are restricted to endless affirmation, that is, to affirming without end – and without being able to negate any – the contingent series of phenomena that present themselves to us.'[216] The question then of which films *do not* belong to the set of "noir" – Vernet's question, "Why could *The Falcon Takes Over* not be part of the set of noir?" – is a question of masculine structure; it is a phallic question regarding the makeshift closure of definition provided by the set of all, the set constituted by exclusion. The not-all set of noir is an endless unfolding of

[214] Naremore's own brief theoretical consideration of the categorisation of noir is with reference to Foucault's *The Order of Things*. See *MTN*, pp. 282-283.
[215] "Film Noir" should therefore be written as barred: ~~Film Noir~~.
[216] Copjec, *Read*, p. 226.

its members. Films noirs belong to the set but are not "contained" by it, insofar as this set has no boundary that would delimit inside from outside.[217] The not-all set concerns only those films which are elements thereof. This would correlate to Borde and Chaumeton's predicate nominalist approach to noir: a film is noir because – and only because – it is subject to the noir signifier or function. The set of "noir" as not-all is thus a product of the barred Other. The set cannot be totalised; it is open and potentially infinite. The unfolding of the chain of signifiers and the enumeration of particulars of the set of noir is thus inexhaustible but must be taken "one by one". Kenneth Reinhard observes that, 'the relationship between particular elements of the open set (...) is metonymic rather than synecdochal: one [element] cannot substitute or stand for another (...) but can only *stand next to* another, in an unending series that has no characteristics that unify it.'[218]

Such an approach to (the impossibility of) defining film noir is suggested in Mark T Conard's 'Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir.' Conard notes the widespread disagreement about what film noir is and which films are in fact noir.[219] He discusses definition in terms of Platonic forms: universal (category) and particular (thing), the form being the essence of the particular; and Socratic definition as the description of form, an enumeration of its essential properties. Echoing Ewing, he asks, 'is there, in fact, a way of identifying the form of film noir? Can we pick out its essential properties and articulate them in a definition?'[220] Conard then goes on to detail the attempts at defining noir, running through a similar discussion to the development of the two stages of the ontology of noir set out in Chapter 1: noir is a genre, or noir is not

[217] Jacques Derrida in fact refers to a similar set theoretical conception of 'participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set' in his 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7, no. 1 (1980), 55-81 (p. 59).
[218] Kenneth Reinhard, 'Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor', in Reinhard, et al., *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005), pp. 11-75 (p. 58).
[219] Conard, 'Nietzsche', p. 8.
[220] Ibid., p. 9.

a genre but a style, or a trans-generic phenomenon; noir cannot be defined.[221] He then has recourse to Nietzschean flux metaphysics to bring into question the notion of stable and enduring being: in agreement with Socrates, Nietzsche insists that definition must capture essence, but for Nietzsche there can be no essence and therefore no definition.[222] This is a result of the "death of God"; there are no transcendental values that could provide stable foundation for meaning. And it is here that the point of contact with Lacan is to be found; Lacan renders the death of God with his aphorism, there is no Other of the Other.[223] And furthermore, this recalls Copjec's comments on definition in relation to the set of woman; what Conard presents is the external collision of different definitions, but this points to the internal limit of the function of definition as such. Definition – in the classic sense; for example, Ewing's approach above – seeks to constitute a totality that would give form to an essence or spirit. Lacan's structure of "femininity" demonstrates one mode of the Symbolic's failure to constitute such a totality. The Symbolic can never provide an account of an essence because it is internally barred; the task of unfolding fully the conditions of film noir is impossible. The function of definition is limited from within by the Real.

Noir is thus an open set, a potentially endless series of particulars infinitely unfolding. Vernet evokes this not-all of noir when he comments, '[o]ne can only be struck by the enlargement of the notion of *film noir* in the course of the years.'[224] He notes that Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama* initially presented but twenty two titles in their list of films noirs and that the list has now swelled – in, for example, Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedic Reference* – to several hundred titles. In fact, the set of noir had

[221] Ibid., pp. 9-14.
[222] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[223] Conard provides a final and interestingly paradoxical gesture; he identifies an existentialist dimension to noir and suggests that 'ironically, what makes truth problematic, and what makes definition impossible (...) is the same thing that makes noir what it is' ('Nietzsche', p. 20). This highlights the precarious status of a formulation of noir as a point where definition fails; it is thus defined as undefinable. These are the sort of "relative absolutes" suggested by Nietzsche's perspectivism, which, in Lacanian terms, point to the function of the *point de capiton* not as the "final word" but a paradoxical, "preliminarily final word" and the "as if" closure of the set of all: see the next chapter.
[224] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 24.

even more humble beginnings and continues to admit new elements, one by one. The originary set of film noir, it should be remembered, was constituted by Nino Frank in 1946. His article enumerated but four elements of the set: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *Murder, My Sweet* and *Double Indemnity*. This would seem to form a perfect, closed set of films. As a chronological series, it could be expressed – like a set on the line of real numbers – as a closed interval: [*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*].[225] However, Jacques Bourgeois and Jean-Pierre Chartier introduced further elements to the set: *The Woman in the Window*, *The Lost Weekend* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Frank's closed set, or interval, thus becomes a half-open interval, which could be expressed [*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*); the set of noir now becomes [*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*]. In the next decade, Borde and Chaumeton's list of twenty two 'Film noirs' ran from *The Maltese Falcon* to *The Window* (1949); the closed set [*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*] now becomes [*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) and the set of noir, [*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Window*].[226] But this list is accompanied by five further lists: Criminal psychology, Crime films in period costume, Gangsters, Police documentaries, and Social tendencies. The apparent boundaries of the set of noir continue to slip. In each instance, the transformation of the closed into the half-open interval should be considered not only a progressing unfolding of the series but also the retroactive modification of the seemingly closed set to constitute it as in fact always-already open.[227]

[225] The possibility of introducing the theory of interval as a means of expressing the Lacanian theory of sets was suggested by Bernard Burgoyne's seminars on Topology, given at CFAR, Birkbeck College, London, 2009.
[226] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 161; *The Window*. Dir. Ted Teztlaff. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1949.
[227] Again, the retroactive transformation of the closed interval into an open one suggests the square brackets "[,]" take on, in this instance, the form of a "relative absolute" comparable to the *point de capiton*. See the next chapter.

Reaching the era of modern criticism, the noir set has swelled to include – as Vernet suggests – several hundred elements: Silver and Ward's aforementioned *Encyclopedic Reference* numbers three hundred and three, Borde and Chaumeton's reissue of the *Panorama* lists four hundred and eighty seven titles in its filmography, and more recently, Paul Duncan lists some 1,028 films noirs in his *Pocket Essential* guide.[228] There came an attempt then to form a subset "classic American film noir" that would organise the films of the 1940s and 1950s into a closed set. Borde and Chaumeton determine this set as [*The Maltese Falcon, Kiss Me Deadly*], describing the latter as the 'desperate flipside' to the former.[229] However, the enduring formulation of this set is Paul Schrader's: classic American noir is a series that 'can stretch at its outer limits from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958)' and therefore could be expressed as [*The Maltese Falcon, Touch of Evil*].[230] But even this set must be opened up; the seemingly immutable *Maltese Falcon* must also give way to another film. As Vernet indicates, the series must be 'stretched back a bit' to accommodate *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).[231] The interval must now open in the other direction, (*The Maltese Falcon, Touch of Evil*], to incorporate yet another film and constitute a set [*Stranger on the Third Floor, Touch of Evil*]. This would, finally, seem to put an end to the question of the set of noir; it can remain closed, the neatly contained "object of beauty" that Vernet invokes in the opening to 'Edge of Doom'. Indeed, there is a very obvious and concrete historical limit (in the sense of boundary) to the set of noir: only a finite number of films were produced during the period designated as "classic" and so eventually, it would seem, the set of noir could in fact be exhausted, delimited, when the final film is discovered. The point is that the open set is *potentially* infinite – it does not constitute "an infinity" itself. This is where the notion of noir as a trans-generic and

[228] Paul Duncan, *Film Noir* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2000).
[229] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 155.
[230] *Touch of Evil*. Dir. Orson Welles. USA, Universal International Pictures, 1958. Schrader, 'Notes', p. 54. In this light, [*The Maltese Falcon, Kiss Me Deadly*] becomes [*The Maltese Falcon, Kiss Me Deadly*).
[231] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 4.

trans-historic phenomenon is important.[232] For example, the horror *Cat People* (1942) and the sci-fi *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are films contemporaneous to the classic period that seem to display the trans-generic effect of noir; furthermore, *Fantômas* and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) are "early noir"; and moreover, as Billy Wilder indicated above, *Oedipus* is a "play noir", so too *Macbeth*; *Paradise Lost* then an "epic noir".[233] Moving in the other direction, Naremore points to the now postmodern condition of noir; it is ubiquitous – 'part of a worldwide mass-memory' – from high fashion to the graphic novels of Frank Miller and computer games such as *Max Payne* and *LA Noire*.[234] The boundaries of such a set could never be delimited; it is ineluctably open.

Furthermore, the critique of noir suggested by Vernet's work can be related to *lalangue*: the open modality of the Symbolic itself. If Lacan's theory of *lalangue* traces the contours of the not-all complex of signifiers not bound by the logic of the universal, attendant to the ways in which language stutters and fails to "say it all" (because 'saying is of the order of not-all – "all cannot be said"') then so too does Vernet's approach to noir emphasise the category as a non-universalisable and open complex; it is attendant to the ways in which noir fails, and that criticism cannot "say it all" about noir.[235] Alain Silver derides Vernet's 'The Filmic Transaction' as a 'simplistic, structuro-semiological rush to judgement,' and his article '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom' as 'pointless deconstruction' that demonstrates 'a solipsistic arrogance that can presume to "correct" anomalies which it does not understand.'[236] On the contrary, both of Vernet's articles demonstrate his ability to draw out the "anomalies" of film noir, of its narrative and

[232] Interestingly, Žižek characterises this dimension of noir as an 'anamorphotic distortion' affecting different genres; for example, the "noir" distortion of sci-fi in *Blade Runner* (1982) and the supernatural thriller in *Angel Heart* (1987) (Žižek, '"The Thing That Thinks": The Kantian Background of the *Noir* Subject', *SN*, pp. 199-226 (pp. 199-200)).
[233] *Cat People*. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1942; *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Dir. Don Siegel. USA, Allied Artists Pictures, 1956; *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene. Germany, Decla-Bioscop AG, 1920.
[234] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 39.
[235] Milner, *Love*, p. 106.
[236] Silver, 'Introduction', *FNR*, p. 4.

critical constructions. He rightly offers a Lacanian void where there was once a body of films. Vernet could thus be considered – in a Žižekian manner – *the film noir critic of the Real*.[237] Such an approach to the question of noir, that proceeds according to the principles of the theory of *lalangue* – not as in the mode of Lacan's late Seminars, where the discourse itself takes on a performative aspect, being constructed as *lalangue* through puns and homonyms; rather taking the theory of *lalangue* at a structural level, as an appreciation of the internal limitation of the Real-in-the-Symbolic – this approach could be considered an "open ontology" of noir. This ontology investigates the field of noir insofar as it is barred by this internal limit, which renders it not-all; it takes as its point of departure the "second stage" of the ontology of noir – the self-reflexive, metacritical understanding – and develops a fully theoretically-informed project only hinted at by the second ontology itself. This does amount to a sort of discursive constructionist ontology but the emphasis should be on the "*lalinguistique*" nature of discourse: the gaps and ruptures of the Real, the void at the heart of the Symbolic. A Lacanian account of discursive construction must be predicated upon an understanding of the inherent limit of discourse, on the manner in which it fails: not because it is inadequate to some external reality but because it is barred from within.

It is tempting therefore to suggest a matheme for *lalangue*: s(Ⱥ), the signification – or even *significance* (as the refusal of signification) – of the barred Other. *Lalangue* resists the meaning effects of signification. This has profound implications for the function of the *point de capiton*. David Metzger observes that writing "*lalangue*" places the definite article in the position where a space would be expected between it and the noun: '[w]ithout this space, *la* is no longer the promise that a noun is sure to

[237] Žižek is called 'the philosopher of the Real' (Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 29).

follow; the predictive function of a grammar is thereby disabled.'[238] *Lalangue* thus betrays the radical contingency of the unfolding of the signifying chain, and this entails a further elaboration of the vector $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$. As described in the previous chapter, the signifier ($S_1$...) anticipates it completion by a second signifier ($S_2$); the anticipation being signified by the ellipsis. In a sense it determines or "predicts" the signifier that will follow it; for example, a construction such as "not only" requires the precipitation of a subsequent "but also". However, such anticipation can of course be frustrated or denied: the predicted $S_2$ may never arrive. In fact, the final signifier – $S_2$ as such – can *never* arrive because there is in the Symbolic always a signifier missing; recall that the S(Ⱥ) indicates a *lack in the Other's very function as the treasure trove of signifiers*. This could be conceptualised at the level of the sentence as the eternal possibility of there being one more signifier to be added; the sentence is never complete, even given the intervention of the *point de capiton*, because another signifier can be appended that would (re)determine the whole chain that preceded it. The signifying chain is always subject to a further signification, and the *point de capiton* is therefore opened up and emptied out.[239] It cannot be the last word because – and this is the paradox of its function – it is always possible retroactively to modify the signifier through the intervention of another signifier. There is no Other of the Other that could serve as ultimate guarantor of the definitiveness of the *point de capiton*. It can only have the semblance of a final signifier: a *preliminarily final* signifier.

This can be discerned at the filmic level in the examples of retroactive noir narrative given in Chapter 1. The contingency of the function of the *point de capiton* is suggested in those instances where the scene which acts to *quilt* the film is not itself the

[238] David Metzger, 'Interpretation and Topological Structure', in *Topologically Speaking*, pp. 134-149 (p. 142).

[239] To recall from Chapter 1 the metaphorical structure of the *point de capiton*, which organises the contexts of the signifier as if on the staves of a musical score; *lalangue* is the playing of all the notes at once. It is the opening out of polysemy, the multiplicity of which overspills the *point de capiton*; the meaningful exuberance leaves the signifier empty, meaningless.

final scene. A case in point is *Sunset Blvd.*: the "meaning" of the floating body in the opening scene is determined ex post facto when Norma, in a jealous delirium, shoots Gillis and he plunges into her swimming pool. However, this is the *penultimate* scene of the film; *Sunset Blvd.* ends with Norma's line, 'All right Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close up', and her deranged and inexorable approach towards the camera. The burden of meaning thus shifts from the murder to Norma's delusion: from the crime film to the wastes of a tale of faded Hollywood glamour.[240] Billy Wilder's other retroactive noir, *Double Indemnity*, presents a perhaps more complicated case. It too positions its narrative *point de capiton* in the penultimate scene; the meaning of Neff's confession in the opening sequence is determined by his climactic betrayal and murder of Phyllis. This scene is followed by a return to the insurance office where Neff, on the verge of death, is confronted by his friend and colleague Keyes. There is again a shift signalled by this final scene; the emphasis moves from the relation between the anti-hero and the femme fatale to the homosocial bond between the hero and the morality figure. In an act of desperation Phyllis tells Neff that she loves him, but it is to Keyes that – with the last line of the film – Neff declares, 'I love you too'. What makes the film more interesting, however, is the fact that this itself was not the original last scene. There is a "lost ending" – cut or excluded from the film – that depicts Neff's execution in the gas chamber and ends with a forlorn and lonely Keyes leaving the prison, and would, as Naremore suggests, 'have thrown a shadow over everything that preceded it.'[241] This lost ending thus performs a resignification of the *point de capiton*; it insists that the signifying chain must always be open to the possibility of the next signifier.

[240] Norma's delusion in fact sustains itself through this *possibility of one signifier more*; she insists, "And I promise you I'll never desert you again because after Salome we'll make another picture and another picture."
[241] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 93.

The status of this lost scene as excluded does, however, point to the logic of Exception that constitutes the set of all. This provides the point at which to turn to the next chapter. Having opened up the void of the Real within the Symbolic, it will now be necessary to understand the way in which the Imaginary can serve to close this gap, to *suture* the wound. Lacan asserts the logical priority of the not-all with respect to the all: language emerges from *lalangue* on the basis of an exclusion, the transformation of the internal limit into an external boundary. This requires the imaginary function of "relative absolutes" such as the square brackets or the *point de capiton* to make an all of the not-all. Lacan's conceptualisation of not-all does not foreclose the possibility of the Universal, rather it points to the specific conditions that have to be met with regards to its construction: masculine structuration. This points to a "closed ontology" of noir that investigates the relation between the first and second stages in the understanding of the category, once again building a theoretical project on the basis of such criticism.

## Chapter 3. The Boundaries and Meaning of Noir: Suture, Metaphor and the Historical Imaginary

James Naremore provides the perfect schema for an understanding of how a "closed ontology" of film noir can proceed. In his introductory discussion of the category of noir, he states that:

> It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term. One can imagine a large video store where examples of such films would be shelved somewhere between gothic horror and dystopian science fiction: in the center would be *Double Indemnity*, and at either extreme *Cat People* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But this arrangement would leave out important titles.[1]

The "film noir shelf" does in fact provide a distinct and defining *boundary* to the set of film noir but, as Naremore realises, such an articulation must necessarily *exclude* certain films. Lacan's theory of the masculine provides an invaluable account of an ontology predicated upon these processes, which can be read together with the Anglo-American film noir criticism of the 1970s to establish the "imaginary borders" of the film noir category. The concept of the Lacanian Imaginary will then be taken up in Thomas Elsaesser's account of the "historical imaginary" to investigate the conventional historiography of film noir as a descendent of German Expressionism.

### 1. The Set of Man

In order, therefore, to take further an understanding of the ontology of noir, the other aspect of Lacan's theory of sexuation must be addressed. The masculine side of the graph is constituted by the logical formulae, $\forall x \Phi x$ and $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$. To recall the reading of the feminine formulae, the universal proposition describes the *kind* of set involved in masculinity and the existential proposition the manner in which it is determined. This first formula, $\forall x \Phi x$, should be read, Lacan states, as suggesting that, 'it is through the

[1] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 9.

phallic function that man as whole [*comme tout*] acquires his inscription.'[2] Here again Fink translates *tout* as "whole" rather than "all", and again – as with the *pas-tout* – the translation is problematic. To say "man as whole" suggests that the formula, $\forall x \Phi x$, refers to a single subject who is rendered "whole". Repeating this on the feminine side would render the individual subject woman "not-whole": something escapes the phallic function, something is missing.[3] As noted in the previous chapter, this chronic misreading leads to the mystification of woman as an absolute Other who somehow escapes the Symbolic order.[4] Instead, and as with the formulae of feminine sexuation, the masculine formulae refer to the constitution of the *set* of man rather than to an individual subject; the masculine and the phallic are concerned with the wholeness (and by extension incompleteness) of a set, as opposed to all or some of a given individual. In *L'Étourdit*, Lacan glosses this formula again, as, 'for all $x$, $\Phi x$ is satisfied.'[5] Man should thus be considered *a set of all*: $\forall x \Phi x$.

This set is modified by this second proposition, $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$, or "there is one $x$ for whom the phallic function is not valid". To this set, $\forall x \Phi x$, Lacan thus adds a proviso; it is 'limited due to an $x$ by which the function $\Phi x$ is negated.'[6] Here the formula *does* refer to an individual of some sort: there exists some $x$ who is not subject to the phallic function, who refuses castration, and in doing so acts as a limit to the set of man. In fact, man can only be considered as a set of all because there is something that delimits him: Lacan states that, '[t]he [all] here is thus based on the exception posited as the end-point (*terme*), that is, on that which altogether negates $\Phi x$.'[7] The set is founded on a logical exception, on the foreclosure of the phallic function from the very set that it determines.

[2] Lacan, *S20*, p. 79.
[3] There is a difference between "man as whole" and "man as all", as a set of all; and even "man as *a* whole [comme *un* tout], which would indicate *a fortiori* a complete individual.
[4] See Žižek on "how not to read the formulae of sexuation", *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 156-158.
[5] Lacan, '*L'Étourdit*', p. 458.
[6] Lacan, *S20*, p. 79.
[7] Ibid., pp. 79-80.

This suggests the commonplace assertion that every universal is grounded in the existence of the exception that proves the rule. Lacan states that this $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$ is the 'father function' and as such this non-castrated $x$ is to be understood as the Freudian primal father of *Totem and Taboo*.[8] This mythical leader of the primal horde is a non-castrated Exception who is therefore able to enjoy fully – he is the *père-sévère* whose jouissance is not limited by any transcendental law – and, translating Freud's myth of origins into a Lacanian theory of sets, whose function it is to constitute all men as a set.

In adding the proposition $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$ to $\forall x\Phi x$, Lacan shows that the masculine is characterised by a finite logic: it is a closed set determined by an external limit (which – as noted in the previous chapter – should be understood as a "boundary").[9] This might seem straightforward enough, but the relation between the two formulae of the masculine side leads to a number of complex, even contradictory conclusions. Lacan suggested in *Le Séminaire XIV* that there can be no universe of discourse; it is impossible to construct a totality because there lacks a transcendental point of guarantee. It seems then that by *Seminar XX* Lacan had located the guarantor in the father function because the set of man *does* in fact produce a universe in the universal proposition of "all men".[10] Lacanian theory does not suggest, in that quasi-universal manner, that "there are no universals"; instead, the formulae of sexuation point to the specific conditions that must be met in order to construct a "universal". An absolute, a totality, remains impossible as was suggested in the previous chapter. The masculine universal is a failure; the universe succeeds only 'in making the sexual relationship fail (*faire rater*) in the male manner.'[11] The universe of man, the universal notion of man is based in the Exception – the One, $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$ – so that it is not simply that the exception

[8] Ibid., p. 79.
[9] This will be further explored in the next section.
[10] Lacan in fact began to theorise the phallic function and the masculine set earlier, in *Le Séminaire XIX: ...ou pire, 1971-1972*, unpublished manuscript. See, for example, the session of 08/12/1971.
[11] Lacan, *S20*, p. 56.

*proves* the rule but more critically that it in fact provides the very basis *for* the rule. To return to the Freudian image, men are constituted as a set by the sons' murder of the primal father; this exclusion of the limit point – the tyrannical *jouisseur* – does not liberate them but binds them together as a "band of brothers", defined as or by *not being* the primal father. Men are part of the group of all men insofar as they are all equivalent in that they are *not* the primal father. As Kenneth Reinhard suggests, 'a man belongs to and is included in the subset of humanity called "all men", a set that constitutes a unified group, guaranteed by the transcendental exceptionality of the primal Father.'[12] The set of man as all thus requires a negative judgment (as opposed to the indefinite judgment required of the not-all) regarding that which cannot be included in the series of men; indeed, Lacan insists that 'there is no universal that does not have to contain itself by an existence which denies it.'[13] To reiterate, Lacan states here that the universal is *contained* by its exception; man is constituted as a set of all by a fixed limit that takes the form of the exception to the set. Therefore, it would seem that, if, in relation to the Symbolic order, woman is not-all – an open set – then, it follows, man as all is a *closed set*.

This does, however, lead to a problem in the reading of Lacan's theory of sexuation; it suggests that there is perhaps some sort of complementarity between the sets of men and woman. Indeed, set theory proper states that the closed set is a complement of an open set. On this point Lacan is unequivocal: there is and can be no complementarity between the sexes, and thus no complementarity between the sets.[14] The two sets, masculine and feminine, do not form a whole or totality in the mode of Aristophanes' myth of perfect spherical beings. In *Seminar XI* Lacan refers to this

[12] Reinhard, *Neighbor*, p. 52.
[13] Lacan, '*L'Étourdit*', p. 451.
[14] On the different types of jouissance associated with the masculine and feminine poles of sexuation Lacan states, 'If I had said "complementary" what a mess we'd be in! We would fall back into the whole' (*S20*, p. 73).

notion of the primordial androgyne torn asunder by Zeus and the misleading 'pursuit of the complement,' who, he insists, is emphatically not one's 'other half.'[15] Lacan's subsequent theorisation of the failure of sexual relation – there is no rapport between the sexes [*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*] – is a continuation and extension of this rejection of the primal myth.[16]

The formulae for masculinity and femininity present two mutually exclusive logics and constitute two incompatible sets. What then of the masculine "closed" set, if it is not the open set's complement? Is this just another case of "bad Lacanian mathematics", a corrupted and misunderstood version of set theory? The strategic answer would be the one offered in the previous chapter; the Lacanian theory of sets borrows from set theory for its own purposes and should therefore not be understood in the same terms. There is, however, here a very precise theoretical point at stake, one that reveals the specificity of the Lacanian theory of sets and the necessity of reading *both* sides of the Graph of Sexuation but understanding them as *different*. If it is true both that, for all men, $\Phi x$ is satisfied *and* that there is one for whom $\Phi x$ is not satisfied, for whom it is negated ($\overline{\Phi x}$) how can the set be considered "closed"? The addition of $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$ to $\forall x\Phi x$ is not to be understood as an instance of a totalised set *plus* a given exception; the Exception is not added to a set of all, it is, as Alenka Zupančič notes, 'something subtracted from an indefinite set to make it a set as such.'[17] The father can never be part of the set of men – he must be subtracted from the group of men to function as the limit to the set. The Exception constitutes a closed set determined by a fixed limit that remains outside itself: it can in this sense be thought of as *extimate*. The Exception can be said to *ex-sist* because, although it does not exist within the set, it can

[15] Lacan, *S11*, p. 205.
[16] Lacan, *S20*, p. 12.
[17] Alenka Zupančič, 'The Case of the Perforated Sheet', in *Sexuation*, ed., Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 282-296 (p. 284).

still be written, as $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$. It functions as a limit against which man as a set of all is defined; it allows the function of definition as such.

On the side of the all, the series of men no longer appears open-ended because it somehow contains "the law *and* its exception"; it becomes a closed set because, as Joan Copjec suggests, 'it now includes – albeit in a negative form – that which is excluded from it: that is, it now includes everything.'[18] Or at least, that is how it appears. Just as the set of woman is a theory predicated on a relation to the set of signifiers, so too is the set of man.[19] As such, it can be suggested that the "closure" of the set of man can be achieved only through the inclusion in the set of the signifier of something excluded from it, and that this is the paradoxical role played by the signifier of the big Other (A) and its lack ($\not{A}$) discussed in the previous chapter.[20] The very signifier of its closure points to its lack.[21] This is the realm of Miller's theory of suture. In his reading of Fregean number theory, Miller assigns "zero" to the concept 'not identical with itself' because the concept subsumes an object that is "none", which is to say that no object is not self-identical.[22]

Miller suggests that it is the inclusion of this concept "zero" that 'sutures logical discourse' because, as a singular category, the zero can be counted as "one".[23] The one thus emerges from the void of the zero, which it serves to cover over or *sutures*. Suture thus refers to the paradoxical presence of an element that signifies the lack in a system or set that grants a certain closure to that set. This can (and should) be read as the

[18] Copjec, *Read*, p. 230.
[19] Indeed, Gilbert Chaitin suggests that, '[s]ex is thus another name for the failure of meaning, the gap in the Other which renders it incomplete' (*Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 222).
[20] Apropos of Russell's paradox, Lacan notes in *S14* that, 'the Universe of discourse does not close itself [*l'Univers du discours ne se ferme pas*]' (14/12/1966).
[21] Characteristic of Lacan's transliteration of Freud into his own structural linguistic terms, the primal father of *Totem* becomes a signifier in *S20*.
[22] Miller, 'Suture', p. 29. The object being then , "that which is identical to itself".
[23] Miller, 'Suture', p. 30. Thereby is the entire number line generated via Frege's "successor function": 0 and 1 can be counted as 2, 0, 1 and 3 as 3, and so on, so that each number $= n + 1$.

presence of the Real in relation to the Symbolic; the lack in the Other outlined in the previous chapter ($\not A$). That this zero designates the Real becomes clear as Miller elaborates his theorisation:

> The zero which is inscribed in the place of the number consummates the exclusion of this object. As for this place, marked out by subsumption, in which the object is lacking, there nothing can be written, and if a 0 must be traced, it is merely in order to figure a blank, to render visible the lack.
>
> From the zero lack to the zero number, the non-conceptualisable is conceptualised.[24]

The zero thus marks the place of lack; like the matheme (as discussed in the previous chapter) it points to the topology of the Real with its contradictory, impossible conceptualisation.

Copjec provides the clearest explanation of the implication of the concept of suture for the chain of signifiers when she suggests that the chain is 'allowed to function "as if" it were a closed set through the inclusion of an element that acknowledges the impossibility of closure.'[25] The presence of the signifier of the lack in the Other S($\not A$) allows all other signifiers to function in a set *as if* it were closed. This "as if" is crucial: the set of men ($\forall x \Phi x$) is allowed to function *as if* it were closed by virtue of the function of an exception ($\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$) that is extimate to the set, included as excluded.[26] Thus there is no risk of complementarity because the set of man *is not* a closed set – a closed set would suggest once again a "whole" – it does not and cannot form a totality with the open set.[27] This is the aforementioned specificity of the Lacanian theory of sets. The formulae of sexuation present a precisely defined theory; the Lacanian sets can be determined in two, logically articulated ways – the masculine and the feminine – that

[24] Miller, 'Suture', p. 30.
[25] Copjec, *Read*, p. 174. This also the chapter that appears in the *Shades of Noir* compilation; Copjec theorises a certain type of noir detective film in which the crime scene is not-all and the narrative is rendered "as if" closed.
[26] Indeed, the father function declares – as Samuel Goldwyn famously (never) said to the MPPDA – "Include me out!".
[27] The French "*ensemble*" is interesting here, having the meaning of both a whole and a set (in the general and mathematical senses).

must be understood together but are, in relation to each other, in no way complementary. There is in fact, *no rapport between the sets*.[28]

If the masculine is a finite logic, then the masculine formulae also suggest that this finitude is based on a semblance of being whole. The "as if" points to the function of the Imaginary: this is the realm of the falsifying ego, which is formed by a productive *méconnaissance*, the choice of identification with the complete and coherent mirror-image over the dissatisfactory experience of the *corps morcelé*. While Miller's concept of suture is reliant on the presence of the Real within the Symbolic, the resultant closure – the stitches themselves – are an imaginary effect of wholeness vis-à-vis the Symbolic. Indeed, in *Seminar XI*, which is to say, a year *before* Miller's presentation, Lacan explicitly designates a suture as 'a conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic.'[29] The set of man takes on a similar illusion of wholeness in order for it to function. Furthermore, if the women's set is shaped by a relation to the ($\not A$), then the lower portion of the Graph of Sexuation shows that man's set is shaped by the relation of fantasy $ <> a: the imaginary prop for everyday, fragmentary reality.[30] The Exception does not in fact present a transcendent point of guarantee. The primal father is but an imaginarised face of the big Other – an other of the Other, what Althusser called the "Absolute Subject", and where Spinoza situated the personalised notion of "God" – a place-filler for the lacking Other. It does not give rise to the possibility of a metalanguage but covers over its lack.

[28] This further supports the reading of the (non-)relation between the *pas-tout* and the *tout* presented in the previous chapter: the "not-all" is not a negation of the "all", nor is the "all" the positive inverse of the "not-all".
[29] Lacan, *S11*, p. 118.
[30] Lacan also defines fantasy as a conjunction of the Imaginary and the Symbolic when he characterises it as 'the imaginary taken up in a certain signifying usage [*l'imaginaire pris dans un certain usage de signifiant*]' (*S5*, p. 409). Meaning is also situated at this conjunction in the Borromean knot; this will be explored in the next chapter.

Apropos of the lack in the Other, there emerges a further point of apparent contradiction when considering the set of man as a set of signifiers. In 'The Subversion of the Subject' Lacan comments upon the unique status of the signifier of the lacking Other S(Ⱥ):

> Now insofar as the battery of signifiers is, it is complete, and this signifier can only be a line that is drawn from its circle without being able to be counted in it. This can be symbolized by the inherence of a (-1) in the set of signifiers.
>
> It is, as such, unpronounceable, but its operation is not[.][31]

This is a recasting of the Russell's paradox-like dilemma that faces the constitution of the set of signifiers, as described in the previous chapter. The relation between the suturing S(Ⱥ) and all other signifiers – equivalent to the relation between men and the Exception – is, as mentioned above, an extimate one: it is excluded from within. The set of all or battery of signifiers is "complete": it is a set of all men or all signifiers, but there is one signifier ($\exists x$) that cannot be counted within the circle of the set ($\overline{\Phi x}$). This results in a certain lack within the set that is inexpressible but whose function can be expressed as the inherence of (-1), or in symbolic logic as $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$.[32] As Lorenzo Chiesa observes, 'S (A barred) is both different from other signifiers S2 insofar as it represents the missing signifier, and not separated from them insofar as this missing signifier is counted *within* the set of signifiers as -1.'[33] It persists, therefore, in its presence as a gap within the Other.

The set of all, therefore, does not form a whole but a (w)hole; there is a hole within the whole, the absent presence of the exception to the rule. The set of signifiers is then incomplete, or "decompleted" by the presence of a signifier, S(Ⱥ). It would seem then that it is in fact the masculine set, the set of all, that is *not all* or *not whole* rather

[31] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 694.
[32] The mathematical terms might appear confused and confusing: to be clear, Miller's conceptualization of the unconceptualisable – the zero, the concept of the non-self identical – is a correlate of the Real; the presence of this Real in the Symbolic – the paradoxical signifier of the lack in the Other S(Ⱥ) – Lacan suggests, is the equivalent of a (-1) in the set of signifiers.
[33] Chiesa, *Subjectivity*, p. 121.

than the feminine set.[34] This lack has the effect that, despite being considered "all" and being determined by an external limit, the set of man still permits the inclusion of further, new elements. The set of signifiers is missing a signifier and is thus able to accommodate *one signifier more*.[35] The Lacanian theory of the all suggests therefore that every purported whole is incomplete and can be supplemented. Lacan presents two distinct and asymmetrical sets: sexuation is thus a choice between the incomplete and the open.[36] This question of the one signifier more will now have to be taken up in relation to a certain type of film noir criticism to examine the way in which the critical category functions like the as-if-closed circle of the set of signifiers to admit new members.

[34] Miller in fact suggests that, 'in English one could perhaps say "no whole without a hole",' but then unhelpfully adds, 'I would be inclined to translate Lacan's "pas-tout" – one of his categories – by (w)hole' (*Television*, p. xxiii).

[35] Indeed, Paul Verhaeghe offers the image of the set of signifiers as a sliding tile puzzle: the gap is necessary for the functioning of the toy. See *Beyond Gender: From Subject to Drive* (New York: Other Press, 2001), p. 77n36.

[36] Lacan's "mis-definition" of the open set noted in the previous chapter – a set that excludes its own limits – would seem to correspond to the set of all, which does indeed seek to exclude its limit; the as-if-closed set does, however, does also *include* its own limit as (-1).

## 2. A Topology of Noir (II)

How then does the Lacanian theory of masculine sexuation relate to film noir? Is there some film that stands as an Exception to the set, that can found a universal notion of noir? *Casablanca* might seem like a good candidate. It has many of the hallmarks of a film noir: a cast featuring Bogart and Lorre, a plot infused with sex, intrigue and moral ambiguity, tenebristic interior shots and a smoky bar, and yet it is generally not considered noir.[37] For example, it features in neither Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama* nor Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedia*. There are of course obvious historical reasons for this omission: the depiction of collaborationism and the film's dimension as propaganda meant it was rejected by French critics.[38] However, *Casablanca*, while an omission from the set of noir, does not stand in relation to the set as some excluded One, an ur-film against which all other films noirs are defined. *Casablanca* is not then the $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$ to the noir all. Perhaps Fritz Lang's *M* fulfils this function; as a precursor, it is positioned outside the set of classic film noir and yet it is accorded great significance *within* the set by film noir critics. Neither, however, is *M* the "One" of noir; it has been subsumed into a larger critical set of noir, having been designated, retroactively, as "proto-noir" (a process that will be explored in the final section of this chapter). Instead, it will be necessary to look briefly at another theorist, whose work suggests a more general possibility for what can be achieved with the Lacanian theory of the masculine, and points to another way in which to approach noir.

As noted in the previous chapter, Lacan's conceptualisation of sexuation as a logic permits, if not necessitates, its extension into other discourses. An example of this is the work of Jean-Claude Milner, who takes Lacanian theory into the realm of linguistics proper and thereby suggests a new possibility for the understanding of noir

[37] Curtiz did of course go on to make films such as *Mildred Pierce* and *The Unsuspected* (1947), which generally *do* fall under the signifier "noir".
[38] See Naremore on this point, *MTN*, p. 317n43.

and the masculine. In *For the Love of Language*, Milner utilises the categories of Lacan's *Encore* to theorise linguistics as a science of language: a discourse that comes up against the Real. Milner establishes a distinction between grammar and linguistics, suggesting that the former constitutes language as an imaginary 'totality' whereas the latter treats language as a symbolic 'all.'[39] Grammar, for Milner, is considered complete because it contains both the grammatical and the ungrammatical within its system; it is a unified whole, a Gestalt image of language that can be perceived in a glance and permits no exterior. In contradistinction to this, Milner compares linguistics to a 'symbolic writing' that accounts only for that which can be formalised, while at the same time permitting the existence of the non-formalisable: something that escapes linguistics which Milner associates with the Real.[40] This "exterior" Milner formulates in a classically masculine or phallic way; he assigns to this ineffable the category of the not-all, establishing it as the excluded partner of the all and thereby participating in the kind of mystification of the not-all described above. In Lacanian terms, it is *not* the not-all that must be excluded; rather – to recall Zupančič – something must be excluded *from* the indefinite to make a set as such.

There is in fact a very similar process at work in the constitution of both grammar and linguistics as Milner describes them. The "imaginary grammar" is constituted by a logic of exclusion – the distinction grammatical/ungrammatical – that establishes a limit or boundary to language. The grammatical is thus defined by what is excluded and is thereby made whole. Similarly, the "symbolic linguistics" is defined by its exterior – Milner's "not-all", the Lacanian Exception – that constitutes it as an "all". As suggested above, Milner overlooks the necessarily imaginary dimension of the symbolic all and misrecognises the Gestalt image as a "totality", which can only exist in

[39] Milner, *Love*, p. 75.
[40] Ibid., p. 75.

the Real. Grammar and linguistics as Milner formulates them therefore take the form of two responses to the lack in the Other. Grammar has the structure of perversion: the grammarian claims a totality where there is none. The "complete" grammar is a disavowal: "*I know very well that the Other is lacking, but still...*".[41] Linguistics has a neurotic (and specifically masculine) structure: Milner suggests that, '[i]n order to succeed, linguistics must simply ignore the lack.'[42] In other words, the linguist must *repress* the lack in order to constitute an all. The question then arises of whether the "as if" is a perverse mode too. Is it a case of, "*I know very well... but I will act* as if..."? The answer must be no. The sutured/suturing "as if" is a neurotic mode because, as Miller states, it also depends upon a *repression* of the zero-lack.[43] What is at stake then, *pace* Milner, is a symbolic-imaginary all that is distinct from the real totality and an imaginary whole. And what Milner's work with Lacanian theory thus emphasises is the *logic of exclusion* that characterises masculine structure. It is from here that another topology of noir can proceed.

It is the first movement, the original attempts to answer the question, "What is noir?" that constitutes such a masculine topology. In his introduction to the second volume of the *Film Noir Reader*, which reproduces those originary pieces of criticism by Lloyd Shearer, Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, Alain Silver states that, 'the definition of [the noir] sensibility is the purpose of this collection.'[44] He continues to set

[41] Cf. The discussion of Octave Mannoni in the previous chapter.
[42] Ibid., p. 75.
[43] Miller, 'Suture', p. 25. Furthermore, that this is a specifically *masculine* structure is explained by Miller's notes on the differences between hysteria and obsessionality. Lacanian theory reiterates the traditional psychoanalytical link between masculinity and obsessionality, and femininity and hysteria; however, instead of simply reaffirming old stereotypes these connections can be expressed in structural terms and understood as aspects of sexuation. Hysteria, Miller suggests, involves an assumption of the lack that 'presents the divided subject at its purest,' which is to say as *desiring*. This can be understood in terms of the pure, metonymic unfolding of the signifying chain towards infinity: the mode of the feminine not-all. In contradistinction, Miller suggests that obsessionality involves a "constraint", an attempt to annul the lack, which can be understood as the effort to tack $S_1$ and $S_2$ together, to arrest the chain of signifiers and constitute it as an all. Thus, Miller concludes, '[s]uturing would appear as the specifically obsessional mode of repression.' See Miller, 'H20: Suture in Obsessionality', www.lacan.com/suturef.htm. Accessed 1st February 2010.
[44] Silver, 'Introduction', *FNR2*, pp. 3-7 (p. 5).

out the logic at work in such efforts, noting that 'the writers herein may approach that definition either directly (what *film noir* is) or indirectly (what it is not).' [45] Lacan's masculine topology suggests that these approaches are indeed two sides of the same coin. The first attempt to formalise those insights of Frank et al. – Borde and Chaumeton's gesture 'Toward a definition of film noir' – begins with a negative judgement that serves to establish noir in opposition to another set: they insist that, 'a film noir is not a police documentary.'[46] They continue with an enumeration of the differences between the two series. First is the 'angle of vision:' the police procedural considering a crime 'from without,' from the position of law enforcement, and the film noir 'from within,' which is to say from the position of the criminal.[47] Second is a moral difference: the heroes of the police documentary are incorruptible, whereas in the film noir the police are 'of dubious character' and, inversely, the lawbreakers 'rather personable.'[48] Borde and Chaumeton's method here suggests Lacan's statement in '*L'Étourdit*' that, 'the false is not only seen as being the other side of the truth, it designates it as well [*le faux ne s'aperçoit pas qu'à être de la vérité l'envers, il la désigne aussi bien*].'[49] The police documentary is established as the "false other side" of the film noir, and in their delineation of noir, Borde and Chaumeton would thus be in agreement with Lacan when he adds, '[i]t is correct therefore to write it as I do: $\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$.'[50] The Exception, the excluded, is the "other side" of the all; therefore, in *not being* the police documentary, the noir set is in some way delimited for Borde and

[45] Ibid., p. 5.
[46] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 5.
[47] Ibid., p. 6.
[48] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[49] Lacan, '*L'Étourdit*', p. 459.
[50] Ibid., p. 459.

Chaumeton. The process of exclusion – the negation of the police documentary – also designates its inverse, which is to say, that which is *included* in the set of film noir.[51]

Continuing in this vein, there is a masculine dimension to be found in Marc Vernet's enquiry in '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom', which – as discussed in the previous chapter – more broadly presents a feminine topology of noir.[52] In a discussion of the relation between hard-boiled fiction and film noir, Vernet asks why Frank Tuttle's *The Glass Key* (1935) and Herbert Leeds' *Time to Kill* (1942) are not noir, given that they are adapted from stories by Hammett and Chandler. Crucially, Vernet continues, '[w]hy could not the first version of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, (...) directed in 1942 under the title *The Falcon Takes Over* by Irving Reis, be part of the set?'[53] This – albeit in a non-Lacanian or even theoretical manner – explicitly raises the question of which films *do not* belong to the set of noir. This puts into play a logic of exclusion and differentiation that serves to delimit the set: a logic that is found again when Vernet notes that 'the term *film noir* allows us to believe we can contain a certain form of detective fiction within the pages of a book written to describe it,' and which leads him to ask, 'what American detective films of the 1940s and 1950s are excluded from the proposed surveys?'[54] These excluded films serve to *contain* the set of film noir in the same way that the Exception ($\exists x\overline{\Phi x}$) serves to contain the set of all ($\forall x\Phi x$). Furthermore, Vernet expresses a desire 'to try and make an encyclopaedia of detective films not included in the encyclopaedias of *films noirs*' that would, in a sense, be the

[51] This inclusive/exclusive approach to the set of noir can also be compared to Rick Altman's comments on the "list" and the "canon" in his semantic/syntactic approach to genre. See *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 2000), pp. 216-225.
[52] Interestingly, Žižek describes Wittgenstein's early philosophy as a "masculine" discourse of the all, where the world is a 'bounded whole of "facts"' and the late philosophy as "feminine" discourse where language is not-all, a 'multitude of dispersed practices loosely interconnected by "family resemblances"' ('Four Discourses, Four Subjects', in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. by Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998), pp. 75-114 (p. 85)). This accords with the two practices of the discursive construction of film noir set out here and in the previous chapter.
[53] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 14. *The Glass Key*. Dir. Frank Tuttle. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1935; *Time to Kill*. Dir. Herbert Leeds. USA, Twentieth Century Fox, 1942.
[54] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 24.

masculine activity par excellence: instead of the feminine, positive unfolding of the noir series – a process of endless affirmation of members of the set – the masculine entails the endless, obsessional task of searching for some final $S_2$ that could, through a negation, finally constrain the set of signifiers.

This endeavour to *define* film noir could thus be considered a "closed ontology" insofar as it seeks to divide and exclude to constitute noir as – following the masculine logic – a set of all. It might seem obvious to state, but the Lacanian theory of masculine sexuation suggests that the act of definition is a process whereby a boundary to a concept (or set) is established through a negative judgement: the designation of what is not included in the set. Against the method of Socratic definition outlined in the previous chapter and promoted in relation to film noir by Dale Ewing, which relies on a Platonic ontology of the forms of virtues and would thus have the structure of a psychotic discourse of "totality", a "masculine definition" would function as a modality of the "as if" and its closed ontology. As was shown in the previous chapter, it is always possible to add another signifier to the set of film noir: Vernet's 'enlargement of the notion of *film noir*.'[55] In Millerian terms, the sutured, apparently closed set $[x, y]$ must be at the very least a half-open interval $[x, y)$ because it is always possible to add one more to any number appearing at the end of the series: the $(n + 1)$ of the successor function. The elements $x$ and $y$ always imply $z$, and so on; just as, for example, the series [*The Maltese Falcon, Kiss Me Deadly*] always implies *Stranger on the Third Floor* or *Touch of Evil*.

Moreover, if the film noir (or the masculine set) has been articulated as closed – Alain Silver suggests that '[*f*]*ilm noir* is a closed system' and characterises noir as 'a self-contained reflection of American culture and its preoccupations at a point in time'

[55] Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 24.

and ‘the unique example of a wholly American film style,’ determinations which are predicated upon a closed ontology – the masculine topology insists that, as Copjec notes, ‘this must mean that some limit has been applied to the series of numbers’ or set.[56] It will therefore be necessary to introduce here an important theoretical feature: in *For They Know Not What They Do*, Slavoj Žižek observes ‘the Hegelian distinction between boundary and limit.’[57] The boundary Žižek suggests, is ‘the external limitation of an object, its qualitative confines which confer upon it its identity;’ whereas the limit ‘is what the object *ought to* (although it never actually *can*) become,’ which ‘results from a “reflection-into-itself” of the boundary.’[58] He takes the example of national boundaries and national identity to show that ‘every boundary proves itself a limit.’[59] A nation is first defined through its difference from its neighbours, a geographical border or external *boundary*. However, no individual can live up fully to a paradigm of national identity; it thus becomes an unattainable point, an internal *limit* to the concept of nation.[60] The closed ontology, however, involves a movement in the opposite direction. If the theory of sexuation presents two responses to the impossibility of totalisation as an inherent limit to the Symbolic order – indeed, Žižek explicitly connects the limit to the barred Other and the notion of *lalangue* – then feminine logic, as suggested in the previous chapter and above, is an assumption of this limit or lack to constitute an unbounded, open set.[61] Masculine logic stands in a different relation to the lack: since no exterior limit is conceivable – there is no Other of the Other – the inherent limit, the fault at the heart of the field of the Other ($\not{A}$), is turned outwards; it is

[56] Silver, ‘Introduction’, *FNR*, pp. 9 & 6; Copjec, *Read*, p. 173.
[57] Žižek, *For They Know*, p. 109.
[58] Ibid., pp. 109-110.
[59] Ibid., p. 110.
[60] See ibid., p. 110.
[61] See ibid., p. 111.

projected into an imaginary, unlimited Exception whose exclusion serves to erect an external boundary to the set.[62]

These imaginary boundaries can be detected in the expression of film noir as a series or list: Schrader's determination of noir as an interval that 'can stretch at its outer limits from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958)' or [*The Maltese Falcon, Touch of Evil*].[63] The "outer limits" are the borders signified by the square brackets, which divide off the set from other films; Schrader's series excludes, for example, *The Window*, which serves as a boundary point for Borde and Chaumeton's original set of twenty two films noirs. James Naremore's image of the "film noir shelf" in a video shop – referred to at the start of this chapter – presents an even more vivid realisation of this imaginary bounding; the square brackets become the bookends of the shelf, containing *Cat People* at one extreme and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* at the other, while still, Naremore admits, leaving out important titles.[64] To the set there must inhere therefore the (-1) that permits the inclusion of further, new members. The noir set is thus constituted as a (w)hole or set of all. Masculine logic presents another way in which to conceive of the possibility of one signifier more; instead of being simply open, the set contains a certain gap, while at the same time being allowed to function *as if* it were closed.[65] The closed ontology of noir – at work in the criticism of, for example, Borde and Chaumeton, and Schrader – serves to constitute film noir as a set of all, a sutured universal that is constructed, or extracted from the multiplicity of films. There

[62] The structure of this project necessitated the presentation of Vernet's formulation of the not-all *before* this discussion of the all, perhaps proving Žižek's assertion of 'the logical priority of the not-all to the All' (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 58). However, the not-all can only be discerned from the position of the all: chronologically, Vernet's open ontology came *after* the closed ontology here described. His essay seeks to unpick the stitches of the sutured all, aiming at a post-symbolic not-all through the principles of rupture and failure. Both methodologies are responses to the multiplicity of historical events and films; Vernet does not aim for a return to some pre-symbolic state. In this way, Vernet finds – with Žižek – that the boundary proves itself a limit.

[63] Schrader, 'Notes', p. 54. This is reiterated by JP Telotte, who suggests that, '[i]f pressed to name *bracketing films* for the genre/cycle, I would choose such titles as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958)' (*Voices*, p. 36, emphasis added).

[64] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 9.

[65] Recall Verhaeghe's image of the sliding tile toy.

can in this ontology be many universals; as Schrader himself notes, '[a]lmost every critic has his own definition of *film noir*, and personal list of film titles and dates to back it up,' which chimes with Milner's observation that, in linguistics, 'universalising propositions are possible for one language among others.'[66] A *totality* of noir is impossible but the construction of a universal is not; the masculine topology provides the conditions of its possibility.

It is here that a new relevance for the theory of suture in Film Studies can be found. That suture can name this process – the turning outwards of the internal limit (zero), and into an external boundary (one) – can be seen when it comes to defining the signifier "noir" itself. The process of definition in the closed ontology functions according to the logic of making an all. As noted in the previous chapter, Mark Conard's Nietzschean reading of noir emphasises the impossibility of a Socratic definition, and yet definitions of film noir are proffered – as Schrader suggests – by every critic. In Lacanian terms then, definition *is* possible, despite the lack in the Other because these definitions function in the mode of the "as if". Out of Conard's Nietzschean flux – the multiplicity of films and signifiers that face the critic – the masculine logic of exclusion extracts the signifier "noir" and sutures the set to constitute it as an all. The closed ontology *defines* in the sense of determining the boundary and extent of a concept; it is a word that derives ultimately from the Latin *finis*, which means of course "end" but also "boundary". The masculine is a topology in which – through the logic of exclusion – imaginary boundaries (imaginary in the fully Lacanian sense that the ego is imaginary: a necessary effect of cohesion and completeness) are erected to allow a concept such as "film noir" to be treated *as if* it were encircled, so that it can signify, for example for one critic:

[66] Schrader, 'Notes', p. 54; Milner, *Love*, p. 99.

> a body of films (for this study only American films noirs are examined, but they were also produced in England and France), made roughly between 1940 and 1958. The tone and mood of the film noir was overwhelmingly black, hence its name. The main protagonists of these films were usually people who were suffering from existential angst. Life was conceived to be a hopeless proposition, with people having no control over their fates. Despair, alienation, disillusionment, moral ambiguity, pessimism, corruption, and psychoses carried the day. The film noir portrayed a world where people were not essentially good, but deceitful and rotten. It is a world where the opposite sex, especially women, was to be distrusted, often with good reason.[67]

In order to make a definitive critical statement such as this, the "lack in the function of definition as such" must be *repressed*; the masculine, closed ontology turns it outwards and into the boundaries that act of definition establishes. The zero is thus counted as one, as the limit becomes a boundary and impossibility becomes the very condition of possibility in film noir criticism.

Nowhere is this function expressed more clearly than in Frank Krutnik's study, *In a Lonely Street*.[68] Krutnik begins with an analysis of what could be considered the masculine topology of the Hollywood genre system as a form of cinematic taxonomy, suggesting that genres 'serve as frameworks for mediating between repetition and difference.'[69] Krutnik suggests that, unlike other industries that rely on uniformity of product, the classical Hollywood film industry required each product/film to be different. The genre system allowed Hollywood to 'regulate the parameters of difference' in its product by determining the horizon of expectation, by delimiting what a fiction film was supposed to be.[70] To explain this process, Krutnik points to Steve Neale; Neale states that '[g]enres produce a regulated variety of cinema, a contained and controlled heterogeneity that explores and exploits the optimum potentiality of cinema's

[67] Robert Ottoson, *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir, 1940-1958* (London: Scarecrow, 1981), p. 1.
[68] Krutnik's book is of course a psychoanalytically-inspired investigation into film noir, and like Mary Ann Doane's work considered in Chapter 1, it approaches questions of sex and gender in relation to noir. Instead of taking the psychoanalytical dimension of *In a Lonely Street* as a point of departure (as was the case with Doane's piece on *Gilda*), what is of interest here is Krutnik's remarks on the ontology of noir in the first section of his book. The question lingers, however: is it anything more than coincidental that Krutnik's rather Freudian account of masculinity gives expression to the Lacanian logic of the masculine?
[69] Krutnik, *Lonely*, p. 11.
[70] Ibid., p. 4.

resources and, in particular, the narrative system it has adopted as its aesthetic and ideological basis.'[71] The process of generic distinction produces boundaries that "contain and control" the multiplicity of films in the manner of a closed ontology. That genre is a limiting or bounding discourse becomes clear when Krutnik notes that 'a genre cannot simply be defined in terms of the elements it contains' and that '[g]enres function as intertextual systems which assert a forceful pressure upon the channels and limits of readability.'[72] A genre serves to contain films only in relation to other genres, which is to say as a function of exclusion. Like a signifier in the differential Symbolic order, it only has significance in relation to (and hence in its difference from) other genres, or what Krutnik calls 'its place as part of the genre system.'[73]

Krutnik notes that the discourse of film noir presents a slightly different arrangement because it was not part of an industry-led taxonomy but a post hoc critical construction; nonetheless, for Krutnik it still served 'to locate multiple and unsystematised forms of differentiation' and was consolidated into a critical category by Borde and Chaumeton.[74] He emphasises what he considers the lack of unity in the noir corpus as compared to recognised genres such as the Western, and suggests – like Naremore, Vernet, et al. – that this heterogeneity makes noir a much more slippery category. He notes the "lack" in the work of critics such as Schrader and Raymond Durgnat; there is little agreement across critical and historical accounts as to what film noir is and which films it concerns to the extent that the category risks incoherence. His stated aim would therefore be 'to construct a viable generic framework for the study of the noir phenomenon, one which pivots around the 1940s "tough" crime thriller.'[75] Krutnik establishes imaginary boundaries to the set of noir by defining the "tough

[71] Neale, *Genre*, p. 63.
[72] Krutnik, *Lonely*, pp. 8-9.
[73] Ibid., p. 10.
[74] Ibid., p. 16.
[75] Ibid., p. 24.

thriller" as a crime story that is derived from hard-boiled fiction and features a male protagonist. He explicitly acknowledges the masculine logic of exclusion here at work when he admits that, '[t]his stress upon the "tough" thriller will inevitably marginalise other 1940s crime film cycles which have traditionally either been included within or related in some way to the "noir corpus".'[76] The gangster, police procedural and gothic suspense film are all excluded from the set of noir as Krutnik determines it. That this move is a productive suturing of film noir is suggested by Krutnik's admission that given the multiplicity at work, 'it becomes impossible to divide up the 1940s film noir into tidy, mutually exclusive categories.'[77] He adds that 'the advantage of focusing upon the "tough" thriller is that it allows many of the key (...) features associated with noir in general to be located within a context whereby one can interrogate more adequately their ideological effectiveness.'[78] Krutnik's mode is therefore neurotic; his closed ontology represses the lack in the function of definition to produce a sutured universal, a definition of noir that allows his discourse to function.[79] It bounds film noir as a concept and constitutes it as an all: an as-if-closed set. Such a set depends upon imaginary boundaries to cohere: moving now from an ontology to an historiography of noir, the function of the Lacanian Imaginary will be explored in relation to the work of Thomas Elsaesser.

[76] Ibid., p. 25.
[77] Ibid., p. 27.
[78] Ibid., p. 27.
[79] Conard's work could, in contrast, be considered a perverse mode. There is a certain disavowal involved in his assertion that, 'what makes truth problematic and what makes definition impossible (...) is the same thing that makes noir what it is' (Conard, 'Nietzsche', p. 20).

### 3. Film Noir and the Historical Imaginary

In his study, *Weimar Cinema and After*, Thomas Elsaesser identifies a certain historiographical function, which he describes, in an explicitly Lacanian invocation, as the 'historical imaginary.'[80] Elsaesser finds in the work on pre-war German cinema of Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner two traditions – 'Expressionism' and 'Weimar Cinema' respectively – that, in responding to the German national trauma of World War 2 for Kracauer and the legacy of Romanticism for Eisner, provide a retrospective coherence for the German cinema from the vantage points of New York and Paris.[81] Already this begins to sound rather like a psychoanalytic discourse, and this sense is compounded when Elsaesser adds that, in *From Caligari to Hitler* and *The Haunted Screen* he sees 'mirror relations at work, providing an occasion for recognition/miscognition effects, which in turn favoured discourses and perspectives on their subject that necessarily occluded other, equally well-founded film-historical approaches and film-aesthetic evaluations.'[82] For example, Elsaesser notes that émigré journalist HH Wollenberg's *Fifty Years of German Film*, published in the same year as *From Caligari* – but arguing against the psychological reading of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* – has been all but forgotten.[83] Studies such as those by Kracauer and Eisner succeeded because they reinforced the prejudices of their host countries towards West Germany as the successor to the Third Reich. In America for example, Kracauer's criticism of the 1920s German cinema reflected the general feeling of unease towards Germany as a whole following the war. The categories that Kracauer and Eisner produced – Expressionism and Weimar Cinema – presented readymade identities "for Western eyes" and against which, Elsaesser suggests, it is difficult to argue.

[80] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 4.
[81] Ibid., p. 21.
[82] Ibid., pp. 21-22. Cf. Sabine Hake's commentary on other ways of reading the cinema of this period in *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 26-58.
[83] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 22.

This, for Elsaesser, is the function of the "historical imaginary". He clarifies his terminology, by explaining that he does indeed mean "imaginary" 'in the Lacanian sense,' which is to say, 'the field of representations that a subject lives as his/her identity across self-images, alienated because structured by an (invisible) symbolic, and determined by the (inaccessible) presence of the significant other(s).'[84] He suggests that, with the notion of the historical imaginary, he identifies a 'dynamic of miscognition' in the construction of generic and national identity, with history functioning as a Symbolic, and the cinema as the field of representations. Elsaesser suggests that in this miscognition, the intervention of an imaginary order promulgated by Kracauer and Eisner allowed the German cinema to become the mirror or the shadow of the German historical trauma that was the Third Reich. The function of this historical imaginary was to permit a first attempt at understanding such trauma, as 'unrepresentable history found less its "objective correlative" than its negative image and thus the illusion of a hidden truth' in the field of representations.[85] In this way, German cinema becomes cast almost as automaton: the imaginary-symbolic machinery that crashes into motion in response to the tychic irruption of a traumatic event. The result was the production of certain master narratives with respect to the German film industry: for example, that the UFA became synonymous with the decadence and grandeur of the period, and it was commonly understood as a 'child of the *Wehrmacht*' and thus little more than an extension of the propaganda wing of the Nazi party.[86]

Elsaesser goes on to explain that he finds this historical imaginary also at work in the historiography of film noir – inextricably linked as it is to the history of "German Expressionism" in Hollywood – and finds similar master narratives in play. He suggests that, 'the history of film noir derives its semblance of cogency from the mirror-

[84] Ibid., p. 440n6.
[85] Ibid., p. 35.
[86] Ibid., p. 107.

confirmation (i.e. the imaginary relations) which its images and concepts entertain with the economic, linguistic and political (i.e. symbolic) factors structuring this history.'[87] There is in film criticism, Elsaesser observes, a broadly presumed German ancestry of noir that involves a relationship between Hollywood and Europe that entails the 'circulation of cultural cliché and backhanded compliment' and that provides 'mutually sustained imaginaries of "otherness".'[88] Some of the intricacies of this trans-Atlantic cultural dialectic will be explored in the next chapter; what is of interest here is what Elsaesser identifies as the function of the historical imaginary with respect to film noir as 'simultaneously "covering up" and "preserving" the inconsistencies, multiple realities and incompatible entities named by German Expressionist style, political exile and the Hollywood film industry, constructing an effect of self-evidence by giving them a single name and a cause-and-effect "history".'[89] Indeed, like the retroactive nature of the critical category of film noir, it is a commonplace of film historiography to assert the connection between German Expressionist cinema and American noir. However, this connection seems to stand on less stable foundations than that other truism of film criticism. Elsaesser wonders whether the two histories – noir and Expressionism – are in fact both largely "imaginary". He asserts that, '[b]y placing them back to back, across a listing of German émigré directors, the histories are made to mirror each other in an infinite regress that has tended to produce a self-validating tautology,' and suggests that it is for this very reason that they continue to be of interest to film criticism and historiography.[90] This, for Elsaesser is another instance of the German historical imaginary; what he calls 'a veritable history of the false' in cinema, and an enduring aspect of cinematic discourse.[91]

[87] Ibid., p. 440n6.
[88] Ibid., p. 428.
[89] Ibid., p. 440n6.
[90] Ibid., p. 420.
[91] Ibid., p. 420.

Elsaesser points to Paul Schrader as the principal raconteur in the case of the master narrative of the German influence on film noir; he suggests that it was he who 'explicitly and at length, associated film noir with German Expressionism and its cinematic legacy, pointing to its "unifying" force.'[92] Schrader is indeed an enthusiastic proponent of this supposed genealogy of noir: in the seminal 'Notes', he declares that, 'when, in the late Forties, Hollywood decided to paint it black, there were no greater masters of chiaroscuro than the Germans,' and that, '[l]ike the German expatriates, the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for *film noir*; and, in turn, they influenced *noir* screenwriting as much as the German influenced *noir* cinematography.'[93] Thus the visual style of noir is – for Schrader – as determined by the 'German expressionist influence' as the noir narrative structure by the fiction of Chandler, Hammet and Cain.[94] Elsaesser rightly singles out Schrader as a significant figure in this discourse but he is by no means alone: Higham and Greenberg's *Hollywood in the Forties*, which predates the 'Notes' by four years, suggested that film noir was characterised by 'grim romanticism, developed through U.F.A. and the murky, fog-filled atmosphere of pre-war French movies, [which] flowered in Hollywood as the great German or Austrian expatriates – Lang, Siodmak, Preminger and Wilder – arrived there;' and Raymond Durgnat's 'Paint it Black: the Family Tree of Film Noir' of 1970, notes that, 'German expressionism heavily influenced American films noirs, in which German directors (Stroheim, Leni, Lang, Siodmak, Preminger, Wilder) loom conspicuously.'[95] This "German connection" constitutes a fundamental assumption running through film noir criticism; for example, Foster Hirsch's assertion of the influence of Expressionism in those moments where 'the [noir] film becomes overtly subjective, entering into the hero's consciousness to portray its disordered fragments;' or a more recent study such

[92] Ibid., p. 421.
[93] Schrader, 'Notes', pp. 55 & 56.
[94] Ibid., p. 56.
[95] Higham and Greenberg, *Hollywood*, pp. 19-20; Durgnat, 'Paint', p. 39.

as Andrew Dickos' *Street with No Name*, which acknowledges the difficult nature of such a connection but still asserts the "German influence" on film noir's chiaroscuro lighting and quotes approvingly from both of Elsaesser's agents of the historical imaginary, Kracauer and Eisner.[96] The key filmic players in such a discourse are of course, Fritz Lang's *M* (the prototypical study of tormented subjectivity in a tenebrous and labyrinthine city), the Weimar *Strassenfilme* of Karl Grune and GW Pabst (such as *Die Strasse* (1923) and *Die freudlose Gasse* (1923)), and von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (1930) (with Marlene Dietrich as the original femme fatale).[97]

Against such an imaginary configuration, Elsaesser offers a number of points of critique. He notes firstly that there is a 'peculiarly French element embedded in the origins of the idea of German Expressionist cinema itself,' in that it was Eisner's book, published in Paris in 1952 as *L'Écran démoniaque*, that shaped European understanding of German cinema (and in fact coincided with the work of the French critics such as Borde and Chaumeton at the birth of film noir).[98] Elsaesser, however, does not appear to take the extra step of noting that the *Panorama* itself offers "German Expressionism" as 'the most marked and persistent influence on film noir.'[99] More significantly, Elsaesser offers a deconstruction of the Expressionist myth both after the fashion of and explicitly referring to Marc Vernet's 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', which was discussed in the previous chapter. On closer inspection, Elsaesser suggests, the "historical arguments" for the German influence on noir have very little credibility; for example, Hollywood – as already noted – had its own chiaroscuro or "Rembrandt" lighting

[96] Foster Hirsch, *Dark Side*, p. 57; Andrew Dickos, *Street with No Name*: *A History of the Classic American Film Noir* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2002), pp. 9, 11 & 13. Apropos of Dickos, see the previous chapter for the American tradition of "Rembrandt lighting".

[97] On the Strassenfilm, see Janice Morgan, 'Scarlet Street: Noir Realism from Berlin to Paris to Hollywood', *Iris*, 21 (1996), 31-53). This issue of *Iris*, featuring Elsaesser and Ginette Vincendeau, was devoted to the topic of European precursors to American film noir. *Die Strasse*. Dir. Karl Grune. Germany, Stern-Film, 1923; *Die freudlose Gasse*. Dir. GW Pabst. Germany, Sofar-Film, 1923; *Der blaue Engel*. Dir. Josef von Sternberg. Germany, UFA, 1930.

[98] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 422.

[99] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 24. Nowhere, however, does Lotte Eisner's work appear in the book.

technique, actors such as Peter Lorre were relegated to minor roles as perverts and foreigners, and Ernst Lubitsch's reputation for femmes fatales led to a dead-end in Hollywood with *Rosita* (1923).[100] Similarly, among the émigrés to Hollywood, Elsaesser notes that it was the 'wrong Germans' who ended up making films noirs; it was not Pabst or Grune (who went to Britain) but the *Menschen am Sonntag* filmmakers, Siodmak, Wilder and Ulmer.[101] Elsaesser's most devastating critical blow, however, is to push the historical imaginary to its absurd conclusion; he simply lets the historical narrative of the German influence and émigré creators of film noir play out. He works through a number of "what-if" scenarios in a 'virtual film history,' where 'William Dieterle directs *The Maltese Falcon* and not *Satan Met a Lady*' and Robert Wiene becomes a successful noir director in Hollywood, instead of fleeing to Budapest, London and then Paris.[102]

Furthermore, Elsaesser indulges in a long historical fantasy that rewrites Robert Siodmak's career in light of his Hollywood films noirs. Siodmak's oeuvre crosses both continents and genres; from *Menschen am Sonntag* and *Abschied* (1930), to *La Vie Parisienne* (1934) and *Pièges* (1939), Elsaesser suggests that, 'not much seems to lead to *Phantom Lady* [(1944)] and *The Killers*, even if one leaves aside *Son of Dracula* [(1943)].'[103] However, if *Phantom Lady* is taken as central to Siodmak's work:

> it is as if his whole previous film making rearranges itself, around a certain kind of coherence that, however is less due to the benefit of hindsight, and rather follows the more convoluted logic of a J.L. Borges story, doubling up on its own temporal and spatial causality.[104]

In the light of *Phantom Lady*, a film such as *Pièges* appears as part of the filmic explorations of an auteur, but, Elsaesser notes, '*Pièges*, looked at in its own film-

[100] See Elsaesser, *WCA*, pp. 426-427. *Rosita*. Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. USA, Mary Pickford Company, 1923.
[101] Ibid., p. 428. The "wrong Germans" indeed: all of whom, with the exception of Siodmak, were of course Austrian.
[102] Ibid., p. 427.
[103] Ibid., p. 432. All Dir. Robert Siodmak: *Abschied*. Germany, UFA, 1930; *La Vie Parisienne*. France, Nero-Film AG, 1934; *Pièges*. France, Spéva Films, 1939; *Phantom Lady*. USA, Universal Pictures, 1944; *Son of Dracula*. USA, Universal Pictures, 1943.
[104] Ibid., pp. 432-433.

historical context, does not anticipate *Phantom Lady* half as much as *Phantom Lady* implies *Pièges*.' [105] Without the "benefit" of such hindsight, *Pièges* remains a thoroughly French film of high pedigree. And it should be remembered that, in this historical fantasy, in moving from *Menschen* in Germany to *The Killers*, '[i]t is as if, in exile, Siodmak "remembered" the lighting style of Murnau, Pabst and Dupont.'[106] Thus, Elsaesser lays bare the inadequacies of the discourse of the historical imaginary.

There are a number of striking aspects to Elsaesser's discussion here – the dimension of *Nachträglichkeit* at work will be discussed below – but what is of particular interest in the first instance is the term "virtual history" because it points to a crucial dimension of Elsaesser's effort to work against the historical imaginary.[107] It evokes an aspect of his approach to historiography that coincides with Žižek's discussion of a Deleuzian "pure past".[108] Beyond a straightforward critique, Elsaesser offers something of a positive project that aims to undo the effects of the historical imaginary: to uncover other, potential histories that have been obscured by this discourse. He suggests that, '[i]f in their deconstruction, the false histories have one advantage, it is that they let us glimpse so many different "other" histories.'[109] Through Elsaesser's intervention in the history of the German cinema, the past is opened up to the possibility of an understanding less influenced by the historical imaginary. In the case of noir, Elsaesser points to the role of the B-feature and the independent studios, the introduction of colour cinematography, and 'the single, irreducibly individual and unique fate of each and every German film maker [who left in the 1920s and 1930s]'

[105] Ibid., p. 434.
[106] Ibid., p. 433.
[107] Elsaesser's precise use of the term "virtual film history" is perhaps more in line with the Jungian "retrospective phantasying" mentioned in Chapter 1 than the type of relation to the past here theorised. Nonetheless, it coincides with the terms of a theory of the "pure past" as formulated by Žižek (via Deleuze).
[108] There is in fact a Lacanian precedent for the terms "virtual" and "actual" in Miller's '*Action*'; see his discussion of the actuality of experience and the virtuality of structure, pp. 95-96.
[109] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 436.

that suggest another history of noir.[110] In a lecture given in 2006, Žižek comments on the term "virtuality", suggesting that it is 'possibility which is not simply cancelled once it is not actualised; it [is that which] continues to haunt what happens.'[111] Already the correlation between Elsaesser's "other histories" and the "virtual" becomes apparent: the discourse of the false histories (that which is actualised) does not erase other possibilities but obscures them. The other histories remain "virtual". Žižek goes on to suggest that, '[i]n order to understand what happens, you have to include its echo, it reverberates the possibilities.'[112] This is for what, in a metaphorical way, Elsaesser aims; as he deconstructs the historical imaginary he listens for the "echoes" of other possibilities, the other histories of film noir and émigré filmmakers. Like Elsaesser, Žižek states that, apropos of the past, '[i]t's not enough to know what happened, what might have happened is part of what happened.'[113] The alternative histories are part of the history of film noir and their place in the cinematic discourse must be discerned.

Further to this, Žižek points to TS Eliot, who, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', sets out his notion of 'the historical sense' as 'a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.'[114] When read via Žižek, Eliot's injunction that, '[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead,' can be understood as such an insistence on the appreciation of the virtual.[115] Elsaesser has a very keen "historical sense"; he is all too aware that it is 'a sense of the timeless as well

[110] Ibid., p. 436.
[111] Žižek, 'Lacan: A Lateral Introduction', 1st June 2006, Birkbeck College, London.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] TS Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1983) pp. 47-59 (p. 49). This also echoes Eliot's famous lines from 'Burnt Norton': 'Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future/ And time future contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable./ What might have been is an abstraction/ Remaining a perpetual possibility/ Only in a world of speculation./ What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present.' (*Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 189).
[115] Eliot, 'Tradition', p. 49.

as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.'[116] An engagement with the historical imaginary puts complex temporalities into play, as was seen with the case of Robert Siodmak. And in the retrospective movements of his historiography, Elsaesser attempts to bring out the virtual conditions of a history, the "present-ness of the past" in the history of film noir. Michael Wedel suggests that Elsaesser's notion of the historical imaginary provides a useful tool in the deconstruction of cinematic myths, while at the same time acknowledging 'their very determining power as the founding impulse and ultimate justification of why we should care for not only writing but "doing" and even "living" and "experiencing" the history of the cinema.'[117] Elsaesser's intervention is thus both a redoubling and an undoing of the original retroactive gesture of the historical imaginary; it follows a similar retrospective trajectory but it uncovers the virtual field of history rather than occluding its possibilities.

As such, the most powerful weapon in Elsaesser's struggle against the historical imaginary is the historiographer's ability to insert new possibility into the past. He wonders whether it is possible to "revive" Weimar films (or film noir, for that matter), asking, '[w]hat would it mean, for instance, to "give back" to them some of their other possible futures, rather than keep them the ones that history (the historical imaginary) seems to have locked them into?'[118] Again this coincides with Žižek's theorisation of the relation between the past and the present. Addressing this point in *The Parallax View*, Žižek turns to Bergson and the possibility of changing, in a formal manner, the virtual dimension of the past. Žižek suggests that, 'the emergence of a radically New retroactively changes the past – not the actual past, of course (we are not in science

[116] Ibid., p. 49.
[117] Michael Wedel, 'Constitutive Contingencies: Fritz Lang, Double Vision, and the Place of Rupture', in *Mind the Screen: Media Concepts According to Thomas Elsaesser*, ed. by Jaap Kooijman, et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009), pp. 166-187 (p. 168).
[118] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 8. It is tempting to compare Elsaesser's method to Lacanian clinical technique in that it aims to bypass the distortions or the barrier of the Imaginary to access directly the crucial symbolic dimension, in this case of film history. See Lacan on the "Schema L" in, for example, *S2*, p. 243.

fiction), but past possibilities.'[119] As an example, he points to Bergson's experience of the outbreak of a war that previously had seemed '*simultaneously probable and impossible*' and which then became both real and possible in its actualisation.[120] Bergson explains that, with the retroactive appearance of possibility, 'I never pretended that one can insert reality into the past and thus work backwards in time. However, one can without any doubt insert there the possible, or, rather, at every moment, the possible inserts itself there.'[121] Elsaesser effects a similar formal transformation; his historiography performs a reconfiguration of the elements of the past so that it, in Žižek's terms, 'remain[s] factually the same but the virtual dimension of possibilities changes.'[122] Elsaesser describes his move as a 'brutal revisionism', but such violence is necessary to break through the barrier of the imaginary relation.[123]

He suggests that, in the light of the historical imaginary, '[f]ilm noir is thus in a sense a textbook example of how *not* to write film history' and points to a more rigorous historical analysis of each and every case of individual filmmakers in Germany and America.[124] Elsaesser notes that such scholarship allows for the consideration of historiographical possibilities 'that otherwise – even with the best intentions – would remain hidden, blocked out and lost to history by such a blanket term [as "film noir"].'[125] Through his restructuring of the possibilities of the past, Elsaesser finds that Hollywood tended to use European cinematic movements such as Expressionism and Surrealism to depict disorder and pathology: consider the dream sequences in *Stranger on the Third Floor* and *Spellbound*. This ironic cultural appropriation returns Elsaesser to *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, which constituted Expressionism as the depiction of a

[119] Žižek, *The Parallax View* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 202.
[120] Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1991), pp. 1110–1111, quoted in Žižek, *Parallax*, p. 202.
[121] Bergson, *Oeuvres*, pp. 1340, quoted in Žižek, *Parallax*, p. 202.
[122] Žižek, 'Lateral Introduction'.
[123] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 9.
[124] Ibid., p. 423.
[125] Ibid., p. 429.

disturbed mind, leading him to conclude, '[s]uch, then, might be the "real" history of the German origins of film noir.'[126] The new possibility introduced into the past is that, far from the valorisation of émigré filmmaking styles by the classical Hollywood tradition, film noir presents a difficult terrain of mutual, trans-Atlantic cultural scepticism.

There is clearly a dimension of what was identified in Chapter 1 as *Nachträglichkeit* at work in the relation to the past expressed in both Elsaesser's discussion and its corollary in the notion of a "pure past".[127] Bergson continues his reflection on the status of the past with an expression of this "afterwardsness". A 'new reality,' he suggests, 'reflects itself behind itself in the indefinite past;' it is found in the past as a possibility only *after* it has emerged as a reality, so that, 'its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once this reality emerges.'[128] Its emergence determines its own possibility in the past retroactively, so that it 'begins to always have been' in the same way that, to recall for instance the examples of Chapter 1, the Wolfman's symptom-dream always will have been a primal scene, or the stain on Walter Neff's shoulder a wound.[129] Furthermore, Elsaesser in fact states explicitly (although almost in passing) that, apropos of film noir, what is '[m]ost noticeable is the term's historical imaginary as deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*).'[130] This brief reference is principally in relation to the cycles of film noir criticism – what Elsaesser, quoting Vernet, refers to as the 'unanalysed discourse of (...) predecessors' – however, the effect of afterwardsness is found at a much more profound level in his exploration of

[126] Ibid., p. 436.
[127] Indeed, Elsaesser describes a temporality in the historical imaginary in terms that repeats the type of metalepsis identified in Chapter 1 as being at work in *Nachträglichkeit*. He suggests that the relation between Weimar cinema and both world wars in Kracauer and Eisner involves a confusion of cause and effect, and ultimately that, a 'Möbius strip [forms] before one's eyes,' as 'the films appear as the books' illustrative evidence, retrospectively becoming the effects of a narrative of which they started out being the cause' (Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 4).
[128] Bergson, *Oeuvres*, pp. 1340, quoted in Žižek, *Parallax*, p. 202.
[129] Ibid., p. 202.
[130] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 423.

the noir historical imaginary.[131] There is a fluidity to the past in, for example, the long discussion of an imaginary history of Robert Siodmak that is characteristic of the psychoanalytic concept. It has already been noted that to focus on *Phantom Lady* has an effect on his previous films such that they rearrange themselves around this point – indeed a sort of *point de capiton* – in a new configuration. Moreover, the logic of Elsaesser's historical imaginary retroactively transforms the history of émigré filmmakers in Paris in the 1930s. Accordingly, Siodmak's *Pièges* 'should really have been made in Hollywood, and by Ernst Lubitsch (...) because it illustrates to perfection the "miscognition" factor of Austro-Germans as directors of Hapsburg decadence or Parisian operetta;' and his *La Crise est finie* (1934) and *La Vie parisienne* 'should have been directed by Max Ophuls, who was already in 1936 inescapably associated with Vienna, musicals, operetta, (...) the Hapsburg monarchy or Parisian *fin de siècle*.'[132] Elsaesser also suggests that Ophuls himself expressed awareness of the workings of the historical imaginary when he suggested that he should have directed Fritz Lang's *Liliom* (1934) in exchange for his own *On a volé un homme* (1934).[133] Such a reorganisation of the past evokes both Eliot's observation that, 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past,' and its echo in Lacan's insistence that, '[*h*]*istory is not the past*. History is the past in so far as it is historicised in the present – historicised in the present because it was lived in the past.'[134]

[131] Ibid., p. 441n26, quoting Vernet, '*FN*ED', p. 2.
[132] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 435. *La Crise est finie*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. France, Nero-Film AG, 1934. Elsaesser also suggests that following the imaginary logic, Cornell Woolrich, the author of *Phantom Lady*, had either seen *Pièges* (which was unlikely) or was in fact its "true author", except that he wrote it in 1942 as *The Dancing Detective*. Here, however, things are even more confused: Woolrich in fact first published his "taxi-girl" story as 'Dime a Dance' in the February 1938 issue of *Black Mask*, which is to say, almost two years *before* the release of *Pièges* in December 1939. (*WCA*, p. 435; see Cornell Woolrich, *Darkness at Dawn: Early Suspense Classics*, ed. by Martin Harry Greenberg and Francis M. Nevins (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1985), p. 303).
[133] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p443n55. *Liliom*. Dir. Fritz Lang. France, Les Productions Fox Europa, 1934; *On a volé un homme*. Dir. Max Ophuls. France, Les Productions Fox Europa, 1934.
[134] Eliot, 'Tradition', pp. 49-50; Lacan, *S1*, p. 12, original emphasis.

Moreover, Elsaesser's work suggests that the retroactive movement of the historical imaginary has a particular effect: that of repression. Indeed, *Weimar Cinema and After* is replete with references to the notion of repression and the repressed. Elsaesser comments upon 'the "repressed" of which Lang's film cannot speak' and Lubitsch's treatment of classical subjects 'to show that tragic inevitability or a tragic ending was often a matter of the author having repressed materialist motivations for the sake of aesthetic coherence or ideology,' and more generally, 'the systems of repression and displacement characteristic of the German art cinema.'[135] Most interesting, however, are the points at which Elsaesser connects repression with the historical imaginary itself; he suggests that the categories of the post-war historiographies of German cinema tended to present oppositional pairs – such as Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* – that have a 'symmetry [that] seems to repress something.'[136] There was something lost in or by the discourse of the historical imaginary – which Elsaesser aims to recover – that points to a way in which the conceptualisation of the historical imaginary can be expanded, taken further, in perhaps another or a new direction through an emphasis upon a Lacanian understanding of this configuration.[137]

[135] Elsaesser, *WCA*, pp. 154, 209-210 & 211.
[136] Ibid., p. 24.
[137] Elsewhere, Tyson Namow has taken up the psychoanalytic dimension of Elsaesser's concept in relation to the work of Werner Herzog. See 'In-and-Out of the Historical Imaginary with Eisner and Herzog', in *Screening the Past*, 24 (April 2009), http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/24/historical-imaginary-eisner-herzog.html. Accessed 2nd May 2010.

## 4. The Noir Metaphor

Lacan articulates the mechanism of repression through the structure of metaphor: via a brief detour through Lacan's elaboration of this structure in relation to the Oedipus complex, it will become clear how further significance can be granted to the notion of the "noir metaphor" first identified in Chapter 1 and what implications this has for the historiography of film noir. As was noted in that chapter, Lacan – taking up Jakobson – suggests that metaphor is a process of substitution. A crucial step in Lacan's transliteration of Freudian metapsychology into the terms of structural linguistics was the metaphorisation of the Oedipus complex: both the rendering symbolic of its terms and its expression through the structure of metaphor.[138] The precise permutations of "*Les trois temps de l'Œdipe*" are not here the concern; instead, certain key aspects of the navigation through and resolution of the complex can elucidate this mechanism of substitution and repression. In this work on the Oedipus complex, Lacan presents what he calls '*the formula for metaphor*, or *for signifying substitution*' thus:

$$\frac{S}{\$'} \cdot \frac{\$'}{x} \rightarrow S\left(\frac{1}{s}\right)$$

Lacan explains that capital Ss are signifiers, *x* is an unknown signification, and the lower case *s* the signified 'induced by the metaphor, which consists in the substitution in the signifying chain of S for S'.'[139] He adds that bar through the signifier S' represents its 'elision,' which is 'the condition of the metaphor's success.'[140] In other words, the signifier S' has been repressed, it has fallen below the bar, and so is written

[138] Lacan rethought the Oedipal triad in symbolic terms, the child becoming the subject, the mother as the subject's first "Other" and the father as a paternal metaphor, the third term that intrudes upon the subject as a "father function", rather than an ontological progenitor. Bruce Fink suggests that, in his reading of the Little Hans case in *Le Séminaire IV*, Lacan shows the *Nom du père* to be nothing but a signifier: in Hans' case it is the signifier "horse", which acts as a stand in for his symbolically inadequate "real" father (Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, p. 56).
[139] Lacan, 'On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis', in *Écrits*, pp. 445-488 (pp.464-465).
[140] Ibid., p. 465.

$'. This formulation can be understood when worked through Lacan's theorisation of the Oedipus complex and 'the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, that is, the metaphor that puts this Name in the place that was first symbolized by the operation of the mother's absence.' [141]

$$\frac{\text{Name-of-the-Father}}{\text{Mother's Desire}} \cdot \frac{\text{Mother's Desire}}{\text{Signified to the Subject}} \rightarrow \text{Name-of-the Father}\left(\frac{A}{\text{Phallus}}\right)$$

To situate these terms briefly, the "signifying chain" on the left is the "father function", which replaces the "signifying chain" on the right, which could be considered the "maternal signifier"; or, as Lacan states, '[t]he function of the father in the Oedipus complex is to be a signifier substituted for the signifier, that is for the first signifier introduced into symbolisation, the maternal signifier.'[142] That which is produced – the right hand side of the formula – is a phallic signification and will be explored in a moment. The "maternal signifier" represents Lacan's discussion of frustration through which he draws the Fort-Da game into the Oedipus complex. The mother is the one who comes and goes – symbolised by the "there" and "gone" – and her absence raises a question:

> what is the signified? What does she want, that one? I would really like it to be me that she wants, but it is quite clear that it is not only me that she wants. There is something else at work in her. What is at work is the *x*, the signified.[143]

The mother is therefore found to be *desiring* (of something *other* than the child), and the "Mother's Desire" is thus an *x*, an unknown signified. The child cannot make sense of this absence, it becomes an abyssal question: "*Che vuoi*?" What do you want? The mother can be considered the first Other – the first terrain of symbolisation and thus incarnation of the Symbolic order – and it is found to be lacking.[144]

[141] Ibid., p. 465.
[142] Lacan, *S5*, p. 175.
[143] Ibid., p. 175.
[144] Lacanians are fond of expressing this with the phrase, "lack in the (m)Other".

The child attempts to *be* the object of the mother's desire – attempts to *be* the "phallus" – and the resolution of the Oedipus complex comes as the child accepts that it is instead a question of *having* the "phallus", and it is the father who is in possession. This is the "paternal function" of substitution: the *Nom du Père stands in for* the Desire of the Mother. To be clear, it is not that the father himself supplants the mother; it is a question of an exchange of signifiers in the child's Symbolic order. In the resolution of the Oedipus complex, 'the father is a metaphor;' quite literally it is 'a signifier that comes in the place of another signifier [*un signifiant qui vient à la place d'un autre signifiant*].'[145] The paternal function is, as François Regnault suggests, 'a metaphor which puts a name in the place where the mother is absent.'[146] The traumatic question – the epistemic trouble of the mother's absence – can be "repressed"; the signifier of the mother's desire is *pushed under the bar* as it comes to be signified by the *Nom du Père*.[147] Charles Shepherdson notes that, '[t]he "father" is thus a metaphor, in the sense of being that which the child *substitutes* as an answer to the enigma of maternal desire.'[148] This metaphorical substitution is the "primal repression" upon which all subsequent signification is dependent. The "secondary repression" of everyday metaphor has the same structure; it involves the substitution of one signifier for another in a vertical relation, where the substituted signifier is not erased but repressed. Lacan states that, 'the occulted signifier [remains] present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain.'[149] It is contained in the metaphor as an unspoken element.[150] It is in this way that Lacan's insistence on an equivalence between metaphor and Freud's condensation remains consistent. In his reading of Freud's dreamwork,

[145] Lacan, *S5*, pp. 174-175.
[146] François Regnault, 'The Name of the Father', in *Reading Seminar XI*, pp. 65-74 (p. 69).
[147] In Lacan's second "formula for metaphor", the signifier "Mother's Desire" should in fact be written as barred so as to signify its "elision".
[148] Shepherdson, *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 127.
[149] Lacan, 'Instance', p. 422.
[150] Metonymy – as the precondition of metaphor – involves the movement from one signifier to another in a horizontal relation.

Lacan conceptualised metaphor as the condensation of two signifiers into one concept.[151] Metaphor is based upon an unspoken common trait between these two signifiers; something must be repressed in metaphor for meaning to be produced. To take an example such as "the sky is weeping", this metaphor is based upon a comparison between raindrops and teardrops but it is a comparison that exists only at the unconscious level of language; it is never stated in the metaphor itself.[152] Such connections do not even have to be so simple; jokes and puns often rely upon entirely irrational unconscious connections that, when spoken out loud, do not make "sense" but nonetheless carry a linguistic effect as metaphor.[153]

When this structure is read together with Elsaesser's reflections on the virtual history of the past, a new aspect of the "noir metaphor" emerges. In Elsaesser's formulation, the obscured "other histories" – the virtuality of the history of film noir – can be considered to be repressed; the historical imaginary carries these potentialities "under the bar" as an unspoken element of its discourse. The historical imaginary "represses" the role of the discourses of the B-movies and technological advances in the development of film noir, as well as the specificities of the story of each émigré filmmaker that arrived in Hollywood.[154] Indeed, to return to the discussion of the historical conditions of noir in the previous chapter where an investigation of the archive revealed a certain function – described as a lack in the Other, a fault inherent to the critical structure – these discourses too can be understood as being repressed by the conventional historiography of the Anglo-American work on film noir in the 1970s. It is perhaps ironic that one of the agents of the historical imaginary identified by Elsaesser – Siegfried Kracauer, whose *Caligari to Hitler* cast such a shadow over the understanding

[151] See Lacan, 'Instance', p. 425.
[152] This is of course not the only type of metaphor: see Grigg on 'Metonymy and Metaphor', *Lacan, Language and Philosophy*, pp. 151-170.
[153] It is often enough simply to "explain" a joke or pun to rob it of its power.
[154] Elsaesser's technique could thus be considered a "return of the repressed".

of German cinema, that, in Elsaesser's view, served to repress other possibilities with relation to understandings of German cinema – should himself have fallen victim to the repressive power of the film noir historical imaginary.[155] With the emphasis on the role in the 1940s and 1950s of the French critical tradition in the creation of noir, a contemporaneous possibility such as Kracauer's "terror films" – which appeared in the American magazine *Commentary* – was obscured, repressed by Durgnat, Schrader et al. So too were the possibilities of Hollywood's own discourse relating to these films – Biesen's "red meat" crime cycle – occluded by the "master narrative" of *film noir made in America, invented in France*. In Chapter 2, such historical possibilities were identified with Lacan's matheme for the signifier of the lack in the Other, S(Ⱥ), and this notion can be returned to the Oedipal configuration of repression here being discussed. In *Le Séminaire VI* Lacan brings together the barred Other and the enigmatic "*Che vuoi?*" in his discussion of desire in *Hamlet*.[156] The repression of the Mother's Desire in the paternal metaphor can thus be considered a pushing under the bar of the lack in the Other; the problem of her desire is replaced by the signifier of the father. Similarly then, the "noir metaphor" represses the epistemological trauma or trouble – this lack in the noir structure, manifested by the work of Kracauer or Biesen – to produce a discourse on film noir. The effect is an historiography as an imaginary whole; it is a discourse that can be compared to the effect of the phallic signification in the paternal metaphor, where an Other as whole (the unbarred Other as One, identified by the 1 and the A on the right hand side of the formula of metaphor) comes into the place of the troubling lack in the (m)Other, which can be reinscribed here as (Ⱥ).[157]

[155] Recalling the set theoretical language of the previous sections, Vernet in fact refers to the effect of such discourse as 'an imaginary enclosure (...) in which the resulting critical work ends up concealing the films themselves and their production' ('*FN*ED', p. 26).
[156] See, for example, *S6* (27/5/1959).
[157] As both Lacan and Vernet make clear, this Other must (later) be found to be lacking also: the hole must be found in the whole.

The insistence of the *Nom-du-Père* provides for the child an answer to the mystery of the desire of the mother; the signifier of the father's name is substituted for that of her desire. He accounts for her "comings and goings" as he is presumed to have the "phallus", that mysterious $x$ for the subject, and thereby *gives meaning* to the maternal signifier. The signification of the phallus is thus, Lacan states, 'evoked in the subject's imaginary by the paternal metaphor.'[158] This "castrating" realisation marks the entrance proper of the subject into the Symbolic because, as Charles Shepherdson explains, it 'transforms the *enigma* of the lack in the Other into a *relation* between the "mother" and the "father," or more precisely, into a relation between maternal desire and the symbolic function.'[159] The child works out a signifying relation between these signifiers by situating the cause of the troubling absence of the mother beyond itself, by giving it the name of the father and thus giving a "signification of the phallus", which allows meaning as such to enter the world. The intervention of the father provides a point of reference; Lacan suggests that 'the *Nom-du-Père* has the function of signifying the whole signifying system, of authorising its existence [*le Nom-du-Père a la fonction de signifier l'ensemble du système signifiant, de l'autoriser à exister*].'[160] It establishes a set of symbolic coordinates for the child by retroactively conferring signification upon those proto-signifiers of frustration: the mother is "Fort" and then "Da" because of the father.[161] His signifier fills out the void opened by the Mother's Desire by providing an answer to the question, *Che vuoi*? It gives structure to the subject's universe, regulating the Symbolic order to provide what Bruce Fink describes as 'a compass reading on the basis of which to adopt an orientation.'[162] As the primary support of the Symbolic order,

[158] Lacan, 'On a Question', p. 464.
[159] Shepherdson, *Vital*, p. 127.
[160] Lacan, *S5*, p. 240.
[161] Furthermore, all subsequent signification depends upon the paternal metaphor, all subsequent signification is therefore "phallic".
[162] Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, p. 55.

the *Nom-du-Père* should thus be understood as the originary *point de capiton* without which there would be no Symbolic as such.

Apropos of this, the discussion in Chapter 1 therefore suggested that it was the work of Frank and Chartier that first established the critical coordinates of film noir, upon which the discourse of the historical imaginary depends. Their act of picking out certain films – such as *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Woman in the Window* – and establishing a relation between them made these films part of a structure of cinematic meaning, and gave them a new significance: a "*noir signification*". What this enabled, in terms of the historical imaginary, was an ability on the critics' part to give history itself such a signification. From the first gesture of consolidation by Borde and Chaumeton to the enthusiastic uptake of noir by Durgnat and Schrader – a trans-Atlantic crossing enabled, in part, by the "interruption" of the French New Wave, which was of course influenced by American noir – a film critical and historiographical discourse was established through a movement from the films themselves to the conditions of their production and reception. This allowed critics to read film history retroactively in terms of noir, to give aspects of the development of Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s a *noir signification*. The historical imaginary – the narrative of émigré filmmakers turning continental "expressionism" into American noir – imbues everything, from developments in lens coatings and the importance of the B-feature to the geo-political cataclysms of the rise of Nazism with such significance. This configuration then became the coordinates of work on film noir. The contingent events of what Žižek calls 'the confused multiplicity of historical experience' were thus arranged, ordered into a discourse.[163] Elements that did not fit into this historiographical narrative – the virtual histories of noir – were "repressed", obscured by the critical signification "noir".

[163] Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 52.

The discourse of the historical imaginary thus has a certain durability – recognised by Elsaesser, when he suggests that, 'one doubts that these [virtual] histories will ever retain in quite the same way as does film noir's imaginary history' – that arises from this ordering.[164] Noir historiography – as a retrospective gaze – is an interpretive act; it is an endeavour to "read" the contingent multiplicity of history, to introduce the boundaries of meaning therein in order to account for the critical status quo, the fact that there is a thing called "noir". Such a process can be compared to Lacan's approach to the Oedipus complex. In her discussion of Lacan and Hegel in *The Vestal and the Fasces,* Barbara Schroeder makes an interesting comparison between the Lacanian theory of Oedipus and the *Philosophy of Right*, the latter of which she describes as 'the *Bildungsroman* of personality (…) the story of the self-actualization of the abstract person into the complex individual located in the modern state.'[165] Both Lacan and Hegel ask the question, "How did we get from there to here?" and conclude – in a movement, as it were, "from here to there" – not that it *had* to happen this way, but that it *must* have happened this way. Schroeder uses the (Oedipal) example that, from her position today, it is logically necessary that her parents must have had sex at some point in September 1953; this did not *have* to happen, in the sense that it was, at the time, a free and contingent event, but from the perspective of the present it *must* have happened.[166] The description is logical, working back from "adulthood" to "childhood" and imbuing certain events with significance. This is how the Oedipus complex should ultimately be understood; it is a retroactive (re)interpretation of primal events, which gives them significance after the fact. Its expression as a series of "moments" is a logical, rather than chronological, articulation: Lacan states that, 'the very originality of psycho-analysis lies in the fact that it does not centre psychological ontogenesis on

[164] Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 436.
[165] Barbara Schroeder, *The Vestal and the Fasces: Property and the Feminine in Law and Psychoanalysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 19.
[166] Ibid., p. 19n51.

supposed stages – which have literally no discoverable foundation in development observable in biological terms.'[167] Such an articulation is a useful pedagogical tool for exploring the Oedipus complex from the standpoint of its resolution; it retroactively orders its "progression" just as each stage restructures the experience that preceded it.[168] To "read" history in this way is then to constitute it, retroactively, in the present. Recalling both Eliot and Lacan, it is a process of "the presentness of the past" or "historicisation in the present". Film noir, as a retroactive critical category, "makes sense" of certain films such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon* in that it introduced a new order into the classical Hollywood discourse. The attendant historiography of noir seeks to historicise these films by working back from a "noir adulthood", as it appears in the present (relative to the given critic), to the primal events that led up to its emergence in the 1940s. And so, while the historical imaginary is, in Elsaesser's view, a particularly egregious example of film history, a degree of such retroversion is inherent to any possible relation to the past: particularly a relation to the past that seeks to constitute a discourse thereon.[169]

It is the truth of any such retroactive intervention that it must necessarily provide the appearance of a teleology, a determined progression towards an end point: in this case, noir. Žižek suggests that what is involved in such an instance is the 'dialectic of contingency and necessity.'[170] The "durability" of the historical imaginary is provided by the capacity of such a retroactive movement to collapse contingency into necessity. After the fact, history appears as if governed by a set of laws, an Oedipal "succession of stages" that brought about the present. History cannot be *reduced* to this ex post facto dimension: events were, at the time, a chaotic, contingent multiplicity of undetermined happenings. It is, however, *understood* in this manner. As Žižek notes, 'an act of

[167] Lacan, *S11*, p. 63.
[168] See Lacan, *S4*, p. 199.
[169] See Elsaesser, *WCA*, p. 423.
[170] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 150.

interpretation which is in itself thoroughly contingent – non-deducible from the preceding series – renders the preceding chaos readable anew by introducing into it order and meaning, that is to say: necessity.'[171] This gesture constitutes the past as such, and reveals once again the complex relation between past, present and future in psychoanalytic temporality: the past, from the perspective of the present, is necessary because insofar as an event took place, it could not *not* have taken place, and the present therefore, from a retrospective position in the future, *will have been necessary*. Necessity thus emanates from the future – via the unfolding of the contingent present – to emerge retroactively in the past.[172]

The discourse of the historical imaginary, in Elsaesser's specific sense, endures because it represses contingency. It represses, for instance, the fact that the critical discourse on film noir *could* conceivably have been a discourse on "terror films" or "red meat" crime films, giving its own discourse the appearance of necessity; the contingent "could have happened otherwise" remains in the virtual field of imaginary histories. It is here, however, that a more general sense of the historical imaginary could perhaps be conceived. Could the emergence of historical necessity from contingent events be considered the *imaginary of history* in the way that, for example, meaning is the imaginary of language? Meaning is the consistency of discourse, the determination of its structure and the significance of its elements. Žižek notes that, 'when, out of the contingent external conditions, their Result takes shape, these results are retroactively – from the viewpoint of the final Result itself – perceived as its necessary conditions.'[173] To recall the language of Chapter 1, the "full stop" of the "Result" thus makes the past –

[171] Žižek, *For They Know*, p. 129.
[172] This formulation be connected back to the previous chapter through the notions of tuché and automaton: contingency, as a tychic irruption, is that which suddenly 'stops not being written' and necessity, as the automative unfolding of the Symbolic, is that which 'doesn't stop being written' (Lacan, *S20*, p. 144). Indeed, Žižek suggests the same dialectical relation, where tuché becomes automaton, when 'a contingent feature (say, a traumatic sexual encounter) is elevated into a 'necessity', that is to say, into the structuring principle, into the central point of reference around which the subject's entire life revolves' ('Da Capo senza Fine', in *Contingency*, pp. 213-262 (p. 227)).
[173] Žižek, *For They Know*, p. 129.

the contingent unfolding of events – appear retroactively as the necessary progression towards that point. Taking noir as such a result, its historiography – understood with this more general sense of the historical imaginary – thus functions to make "history" appear as necessity. The historical accidents of the 1930s and 1940s retroactively become the story of noir; a confluence of socio-political, economical, technological and cultural events becomes the necessary determinants of film noir's emergence.

## 5. The Noir *Point de Capiton* (Reprise)

Moreover, Žižek states that, 'the passage of contingency into necessity is an act of purely formal conversion, the gesture of adding a *name* which confers upon the contingent series the mark of necessity.'[174] This suggests that such a transformation can only occur in the presence of a *point de capiton*, an end term that retroactively confers consistency upon that which came before it.[175] Such a term establishes a discourse – in this case the history of film noir – that must be read through and given significance by a name. This is the dimension of the *point de capiton* – familiar to readers of the Lacanian political theorists, such as Laclau and Mouffe, Yannis Stavrakakis and Žižek – as nodal point or master signifier. A nodal point is defined by Laclau and Mouffe as 'a particular element assuming a "universal" structuring function within a certain discursive field.'[176] And it is in fact upon the notion of discourse coming from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony that the usage of the term throughout this discussion has implicitly depended. Stavrakakis provides a neat summation of the concept: 'discourse should be conceived as an articulation (a chain) of ideological elements around a nodal point, a *point de capiton*.'[177] Žižek in particular tends to conflate the *point de capiton* and the master signifier, using the terms interchangeably.[178] This is not wholly illegitimate; however, it is worth noting the distinction between the terms in Lacan's work. The *point de capiton* plays a crucial role in his early Seminars (*The Psychoses* and *Les Formations*

[174] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 150. Furthermore, see Žižek on the role of the *point de capiton* in narrative as an element that confers consistency upon the story that preceded it. Žižek uses *Casablanca* as his example, but this could be extended to the instances of retroactive noir identified in Chapter 1 (*Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 69). See also the next chapter.

[175] Indeed, the *point de capiton* is further implicated in the dialectic of contingency and necessity: the punctuation of a sentence represses the contingent possibilities of what could have been said. The fact that the sentence could have ended otherwise; that fact, for example, in *D.O.A.*, Edward O'Brien's character did not – but contingently *could* – say, "I wish to report a banana..." is repressed by what he *did* say: "I wish to report a murder..." This relates to the logic of the parapraxes: these are the moments where the subject *does say* "banana"; something contingent slips out to disrupt the apparent necessity of his discourse.

[176] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. xi.

[177] Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 79.

[178] For example, in *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek states, 'this is what [Lacan's] notion of *point de capiton* (the 'quilting point' or the Master Signifier) is all about' (p. 262).

*de l'inconscient* in particular) as well as in the crucial *écrits*, 'The Subversion of the Subject' and 'The Instance of the Letter'. The term appears sporadically throughout the 1960s – for example, in *Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse* Lacan connects the *point de capiton* to the notion of suture – and has, for the most part, the quite specific sense given to it by the image of the full stop.[179] The precise point at which the *point de capiton* becomes the master signifier in Lacan's thought can be found in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Here Lacan recalls the reading of Jean Racine's *Athaliah* he gave in 1956 at the Saint-Anne Hospital; he remarks, '[a]ll they heard were the quilting points. I am not saying that it was an excellent metaphor. In the end, it was this $S_1$, the master signifier.'[180] It is here that the *point de capiton* is itself retroactively transformed into the master signifier, in Lacan's discussion of *Athaliah*.[181]

He continues, '[i]t was a master signifier. It was a way of asking them to notice how something that spreads throughout language like wildfire is readable, that is to say, how it hooks on, creates a discourse.'[182] It is this transformative and productive function of the master signifier that is of interest to the theorists of discourse. In his reading of *Athaliah* – as part of his discussion of the *point de capiton* in *The Psychoses* – Lacan suggests that it is the term "fear" that functions as a master signifier; more specifically, it is that '[a]ll fears – *I have no other fear* – are exchanged for what is called the fear of God.'[183] The substitutive-metaphorical dimension of the *point de capiton* is very much in evidence here but it is the result, the transmutation effected by the signifier that is most significant for its dimension as master signifier.[184] The *capitonnage*, or "quilting"

[179] The reference to suture and the *point de capiton* can be found in *Le Séminaire XII: Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse, 1964-1965*, unpublished manuscript. Session 12/12/1964.
[180] Lacan, *S17*, p. 189.
[181] The term "*point de capiton*" does not feature in Lacan's work again: see Henry Krutzen, *Jacques Lacan: Séminaire 1952-1980 Index référentiel*, 3rd edn (Paris: Economica, 2009), p. 513.
[182] Lacan, *S17*, p. 189.
[183] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267.
[184] This can be compared to the transmutation effected by the *Nom-du-Père* and the resultant symbolic coordinates given by phallic signification. Indeed, Lacan refers to the *point de capiton* as, 'this minimal schema of human experience which Freud gave us in the Oedipus complex' (*S3*, p. 268).

as it sometimes translated, of discourse by the *point de capiton qua* master signifier is the process by which a field of "floating signifiers" is unified, given identity. In the same way that, for Žižek, signifiers such as "justice" and "freedom" are read through the master signifier "Communism" so as to determine retroactively their '(Communist) meaning,' here films such as *The Killers* and *Out of the Past* are read through the master signifier "noir" and so their cinematic meaning is retroactively determined.[185] "Noir" thus functions as Lacan's 'concrete point around which all analysis of discourse must operate.'[186] It is the element which enables a film-critical discourse – from Frank and Chartier to the present – to function; it makes possible the production of a certain cinematic meaning through the construction of a discursive critical reality.

The intervention of such a signifier – in the form of a "name", be it Communism or film noir – effects a restructuration of the past. Žižek connects this action of the *point de capiton* to JL Borges' remarks on Kafka; he notes that 'some writers have the power to create their own precursors,' adding, 'a truly creative act (…) restructures the past, resignifying the past contingent traces as pointing towards the present.'[187] The introduction of such a novel element into the past can be compared to the introduction of a "new" signifier into the Symbolic order. Recall that Lacan suggests, 'insofar as the battery of signifiers is, it is complete,' while at the same time there inheres a (-1) to the set.[188] It is this gap, this (-1), that can never be filled which forever permits the addition of *one signifier more*. And yet the set of signifiers that constitutes the Symbolic is "complete"; Lacan describes it as a "battery" and Alfredo Eidelzstein points out that, like a *batterie de cuisine*, it is 'always complete, no matter how many pieces it

[185] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 102.
[186] Lacan, *S3*, p. 267.
[187] Žižek, 'I Did Not Order My Dreams', in Dolar and Žižek, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 103-104 (pp. 103-104).
[188] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 694.

contains.'[189] A new signifier, for example a Lacanian neologism such as "*lalangue*", is introduced into the Symbolic: the set of signifiers was complete before its introduction and it remains complete afterwards, and so the all is maintained.[190] It is only the relation between the elements contained therein which changes; existing signifiers – for example, those that make up the neologism, "*la*" and "*langue*" – take on retroactively new significations. Once again, this is formulated very precisely in TS Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

> what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered[.][191]

In terms of film noir, there is, in this regard, a sort of double movement of retroactivity. "Film noir" was a signifier new to the critical discourse on Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s; as such, it was introduced into the battery of signifiers that made up this discourse. Settling alongside those of, for example, "western" and "musical", it established new relations between signifiers such as "gangster" and "melodrama", which were given new significance – a noir signification – as they became part of the film noir critical structure. This also had an effect on the films themselves: following the naming of *Murder, My Sweet*, *Laura* and *The Woman in the Window* as noir, other films – such as *This Gun for Hire* and *Shadow of a Doubt* – were transformed into noir as well. As Žižek notes, 'when a new *point de capiton* emerges, the socio-symbolic field is not only displaced, its very structuring principle changes.'[192] The films of course remain the same at the level of content: it is a *formal* transformation, in which a new signifying relation is established.

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[189] Alfredo Eidelzstein, *The Graph of Desire: Using the Work of Jacques Lacan* (London: Karnac, 2009), p. 242.
[190] The Other is simultaneously both (A) and (Ⱥ).
[191] Eliot, 'Tradition', pp. 49-50. This is the other aspect of Eliot's injunction to set a poet "amongst the dead".
[192] Žižek, *Ticklish*, p. 262.

Moreover, as a result of the new signifier, "noir", a wide variety of films is reinscribed in the critical discourse: films such as *M* and *Der blaue Engel* become resignified, as "proto-noir", and it is this effect that insists upon the question of the "precursor" as raised by Borges. In his essay, 'Kafka and his Precursors', Borges describes his attempt to identify the literary forefathers of the work of Franz Kafka and suggests that he finds them in the figures of Zeno, Kierkegaard and Robert Browning. Reflecting on their work, he remarks, '[i]f I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This second fact is the more significant.'[193] Kafka, like noir, begins to function as a master signifier for Borges: it orders a heterogeneous multiplicity of authors into a discourse on precursors. But crucially, he continues: '[i]n each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist.'[194] Borges identifies the retroactive effect that Kafka's work has upon that of Kierkegaard or Browning; like Eliot's poet, "set amongst the dead", Kafka transforms Borges' understanding of, for example, Browning's 'Fear and Scruples', which must now be viewed through the prism of the "Kafkaesque". Borges concludes that, '[t]he fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.'[195] Browning is thus reinscribed, retroactively, as Kafka's precursor. This paradoxical formulation positions Borges' thought on this point in line with the psychoanalytic theorisation of causality, structure and temporality where the past is modified – (re)constituted – by the intervention of the present.

Nowhere is this reinscription more clearly expressed than in Ginette Vincendeau's essay, 'Noir is Also a French Word'. Like Elsaesser, Vincendeau

[193] JL Borges, 'Kafka and his Precursors', in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald Yates and James Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 193-195 (p. 195).
[194] Ibid., p. 195.
[195] Ibid., p. 195.

challenges the historiographical master narrative of film noir, this time insisting upon a French rather than German heritage.[196] Vincendeau notes that Borde and Chaumeton dismiss the European influence on American noir, and while she acknowledges that certain critics – such as Durgnat – do mention the French cinema as a source, subsequent writing has not explored this possibility. As such, Vincendeau insists that, '[a] more thorough look at the French cinema of the 1930s reveals strong intertextual links with American *film noir*, via film-makers' careers, filmic reworkings and more diffuse cultural references.'[197] As discussed in Chapter 1, Vincendeau notes that while there is of course a direct lineage, recognised in passing by Borde and Chaumeton, between the French cinema and American noir in that some of the films were either remade by or were the first adaptations of Hollywood features – *La Chienne* became *Scarlet Street* and *Le Dernier Tournant* was the first version of Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – the importance of Poetic Realism to American noir has been underestimated, and overlooked in favour the German Expressionist historical narrative. Vincendeau thus recasts Durgnat's argument that 'Poetic Realism could be considered to fill the gap between impressionism in painting and realism in literature' to suggest that Poetic Realism in fact 'filled the gap between German Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema.'[198] She notes that many émigré filmmakers sojourned in Paris before travelling to America and in that time made films of a distinctively Poetic Realist type: a sensibility which then could have also crossed the Atlantic. However, what is most interesting about this suggestion is the way in which it begins to reinscribe the entire French cinematic movement as a precursor to film noir. Already the way in which film noir could *create its own precursors* starts to become apparent; the intervention of

[196] Indeed, Elsaesser and Vincendeau have worked together a number of times on European émigré filmmakers and both appeared in the special issue of *Iris* devoted to the "European precursors to noir" (*Iris*, 21, 1996).
[197] Vincendeau, 'Noir', p. 50.
[198] Ibid., p. 54.

the American category has given rise to a reconsideration of the past: this "new" element has begun to transform that which came before it.

First, the urban setting of Poetic Realism is reread as proto-noir. Vincendeau compares the Poetic Realist city, 'illuminated by shiny cobblestones and pierced by gleaming neon signs' to the dark and light of the noir city in *Out of the Past* and *The Big Sleep*; she finds in the flashing letters "*Chez Michèle*" in *La Nuit du Carrefour* (1932) the 'precursors of the American genre's "Alphabet City".'[199] Moreover, Poetic Realism as a whole becomes reread in terms of the visual motifs of film noir when Vincendeau suggests that, for instance, '[b]lackness and rain, two key elements of *film noir*, are repeatedly inscribed in Poetic Realist films through this motif;' and the strange highlights across the face in a film such as *Mildred Pierce* – so often associated with German Expressionism – are 'found systematically adorning the face of the most iconic of Poetic realist actors, Jean Gabin.'[200] The effect becomes totalising: Jean Gabin is reinscribed as the precursor to Burt Lancaster as his visual treatment in *Le Jour se lève* (1939) is compared to the *The Killers*, as is Gabin's relation to the space around him: 'trapped in his bedroom,' he is the prototype for Lancaster imprisoned in his own room, waiting for his death.[201] Another of Gabin's characters, *Pépé le Moko,* becomes the precursor to Robert Mitchum's Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past,* as the noir trope of the doomed hero who can never escape his past finds its echo in the myth of escape dreamt by Pépé in Algiers. The retroactive, "precursor effect" becomes all the more striking when Vincendeau cites pessimism as a direct link between noir and Poetic Realism; she states that, '[i]f "post-war disillusion" is often quoted as a determinant of *film noir*, then "prewar lack of illusion" is a determinant of Poetic Realism' and thus an entire period of French history – the precarious years of the *avant-guerre* – is reread, reinscribed as it

[199] Ibid., p. 54. *La Nuit du Carrefour*. Dir. Jean Renoir. France, Europa Films, 1932.
[200] Ibid., pp. 54 & 55.
[201] Ibid., p. 55. *Le Jour se lève*. Marcel Carné. France, Sigma, 1939.

is understood in terms of America's own post-war social history.[202] The effect is completed as Vincendeau continues her discussion of Gabin; she notes that, '[t]he most striking visual image of Jean Gabin – from one film to another – is that of his face trapped behind a window,' and continues, '[i]n an early scene in *La Bandera* [(1935)], this is even underlined by what became a cliché of *film noir*: his face crossed by the diagonal shadows of a Venetian blind.'[203] Here a crucial element of Poetic Realism's own iconography – the image of Gabin behind a window – is reread as a noir cliché; a defining feature of the French cinema is retroactively transformed into a hackneyed noir motif.

To echo Borges' reflections on Kafka, without the emergence of noir – if, for example, Wilder or Siodmak had never shot a reel of film in Hollywood, or, more crucially, Frank or Chartier had never put pen to paper – Poetic Realism would not be read in this way. The intervention of the critical category "American film noir" – because as Charles O'Brien suggests, the French category "*film noir*" had a very different signification – has restructured the past. It has effected a formal transformation of film history, reinscribing its elements in relation to the critical structure so that, retroactively, Jean Gabin is made the precursor to Burt Lancaster, *Le jour se lève* the precursor to *The Killers*, and Poetic Realism as a whole the precursor to film noir.

This of course raises an important question, which can be related to the problem of causality in psychoanalysis. If the subject's relation to the past can only be a retrospective sense of ordering and meaning making, or of introducing new possibility, what legitimacy can such constructions have? If film noir is no more than a retroactive discursive category, why is it so important? It is the dilemma at the very heart of Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit*. Recall that Freud agonised over the ontological

[202] Ibid., p. 55.
[203] Ibid., p. 56. *La Bandera*. Dir. Julien Duvivier. France, SNC, 1935.

status of the primal scene in his analysis of the Wolf Man and ends the study with a "*non liquet*": it is not clear, there is no applicable law. It is Borges that provides the (very Lacanian) answer. Žižek in fact turns to the passage from Borges in his discussion of the "pure past", as being amenable to the changes of the present, and apropos of this, he reframes this dilemma as, 'Is it really there in the source, or did we only read it into the source?'[204] Is Jean Gabin *really* the precursor of Burt Lancaster; can a film *really* be considered "proto-noir" or is it a case of "reading too much into it"? To which Žižek offers the 'properly dialectical solution' thus: 'it is there, but we can only perceive and state this retroactively, from today's perspective.'[205] John Forrester insists upon remembering that 'the Wolf-man's sight of his parents copulating is not an event until it is linked to something that comes after' and points to Freud's declaration that, 'what emerges from the unconscious is to be understood in the light not of what goes before but of what comes after.'[206] There must be a minimal gap between the event and its comprehension – Lacan's "time for understanding" that comes between the "instance of the gaze" and "the moment of concluding" – and so, what the construction of the category of noir shows is that all that can be counted on *is* the retroactive construction of the past, which does necessarily involve an imaginary dimension of ordering to produce a discourse. This returns to the fundamental principle of the *point de capiton*: meaning is an historical effect, or rather, the past is an effect of meaning.

Lacan situates meaning in the Imaginary; it is, he suggests, 'by nature imaginary.'[207] This is the realm of apparent cohesion, seeming wholeness, as-if closure. In light of the discussion that runs through this chapter, Elsaesser's understanding of an historical

[204] Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 312.
[205] Ibid., p. 312.
[206] John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 207; Freud, 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy', SE X, pp. 3-152 (p. 66).
[207] Lacan, *S3*, p. 54.

discourse on noir as "imaginary" is entirely appropriate: the story of noir as a Hollywood appropriation of German Expressionist style is a myth, a fantasmatic support for critical discourse. It presents a compelling narrative – an American story of immigrant success in the New World – and is for that reason difficult to escape; as Lacan suggests, meaning 'is tightly bound to what interests you, that is, to that in which you are ensnared.'[208] It has been promulgated for decades as a helpful and easily understandable explanation for the apparent "dark turn" in Hollywood in the 1940s, and as such – as both Vernet and Elsaesser have shown – has remained largely unexamined. It is a discourse of the Imaginary because it "makes sense", and as Bruce Fink argues, 'something makes sense when it fits into the pre-existing chain. It may add something to the chain without fundamentally altering it or rocking the boat.'[209] It fit with a certain Hollywood self-image – which will be explored towards the end of the next chapter – of European, avant-garde and modernist filmmaking. Moreover, such smooth discursive sailing has been maintained at the expense complicating factors or details – the lack, ($\mathit{A}$), identified in the previous chapter – which have been, as shown above, "repressed" by this imaginary narrative. As Fink again explains, the Imaginary relates to the ego and thus, 'meaning excludes that which does not fit in with our own self-image.'[210] The next chapter will explore further ways in which the effect of the Imaginary is to allow things to "fit" or to "work" through, for example, the construction of a mathematical "fiction" such as the square root of minus one; Lacan's discussion of this "imaginary number" will be compared to both the idea of noir and the function of a noir narrative.

[208] Lacan, *S3*, p. 54.
[209] Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, p. 71.
[210] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), p. 24.

## Chapter 4. The Idea of Noir: Narrative, Signifier, Genre

The idea of noir can, as James Naremore suggests, 'accommodate many different things.'[1] This final chapter will explore how Lacanian some of these "things" can be. As narrative structure, film noir presents a way in which the relation between the "open" and "closed" structures explored in the previous chapters can be comprehended. Through an extended discussion of *The Maltese Falcon* and Lacan's use of the square root of minus one (√-1), noir can be considered in terms of the signification of the phallus, and then in terms of the rapport between Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Fictions* and the Lacanian Imaginary. And as a genre, noir – and then neo-noir – will be explored in terms of repetition and the master signifier. This will constitute the necessary, concluding stage in the development of this Lacanian study, where a final distinction can be made in the formulation of noir *qua point de capiton*.

### 1. Open Endings, Sutured Narratives: Tying Up Loose Ends

In *Looking Awry*, Žižek describes '[o]ne of the best-known Hollywood legends' concerning the final scene of *Casablanca*: it is often suggested that even during principal photography the ending of the film had not been decided upon.[2] While the film adaptation does change the ending of the source material – *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, in which Rick gives himself up to the authorities – and Hal Wallis had Bogart dub in the famous final line ('Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship') after the scene had been shot, Žižek points out that, '[l]ike most such legends, this one is false' and that all discussion had in fact been resolved in advance of filming.[3] What Žižek finds interesting is the effect that the chosen ending has in relation to the

[1] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 267.
[2] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 69.
[3] Ibid., p. 69.

preceding narrative; he notes that, '[w]e experience the present ending (...) as something that "naturally" and "organically" follows from the preceding action, but if we were to imagine another ending (...) it, too, would be experienced by viewers as something that developed "naturally" out of earlier events.'[4] This, as he describes, is a narrative *capitonnage*, similar to the function of the *point de capiton* in narrative structure that was discussed in Chapter 1. In Žižek's example it is the very last scene of the film – as opposed to the revelatory, penultimate scenes of the "retroactive noirs" such as *D.O.A.* and *Double Indemnity* – that brings about this transformation, but in both cases it is the après-coup effect of this intervention that is crucial.

Žižek insists that, 'the experience of a linear "organic" flow of events is an illusion (albeit a necessary one) that masks the fact that it is the ending that retroactively confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events.'[5] In both cases, the *point de capiton* gives coherence to the narrative when – to recall Vernet's analysis – the answer finds its question and the uncertainties opened up throughout the film are closed down by their retroactively conferred meaning. The ending *qua point de capiton*, must serve to contain these possibilities. The closure of the narrative collapses such potentialities – often with an insistent title, "*The End*" – to maintain that this ending is *the only possible ending*: the necessary $S_2$ to complete the $S_1$ provided. The very fact that there *are* such possibilities points to a certain contingency in the appearance of any given ending whatsoever. As Žižek notes, what is masked here 'is the radical contingency of the enchainment of narration, the fact that, at every point, things might have turned out otherwise.'[6] This is the effect of "repressed contingency" identified previously in relation to Elsaesser's notion of the historical imaginary in the last chapter, and this notion can now be extended from the cinematic to the filmic in this

[4] Ibid., p. 69.
[5] Ibid., p. 69.
[6] Ibid., p. 69.

discussion of narrative structure.[7] This would appear to be the *sine qua non* of an ending in the classical Hollywood cinema, which Rashna Wadia suggests was motivated by a desire for closure and order; she notes, '[o]ften resolution occurs only through the elision of all ambiguities.'[8] All the virtual, potential narrative outcomes must be repressed at the last as the *point de capiton* establishes itself as the "necessary conclusion" to events; the number of "alternate endings" included on DVD releases points to the many possible "necessities" with which a film narrative can conclude. For example, to consider again the possible and "lost" endings to *Double Indemnity* – Cain's original conclusion in which Walter and Phyllis commit suicide (an eventuality forbidden by the Hays Code), and the filmed but unused gas chamber ending – is to see in effect three different films: the chosen one ending on a note of male camaraderie, Cain's existential despair, and the explicit crime-and-punishment story. All three endings would have "worked", seeming to have emerged from different aspects of the very same narrative, and casting a slightly different shadow on the preceding film but in each case giving the Aristotelian sense of an ending as 'that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it;' such an ending thus brings with it a sense of "closure".[9]

The opposite is true of *The Maltese Falcon*: instead of a *closing down*, the revelatory narrative *point de capiton* here effects a radical *opening up*. This film thus presents the theoretical inverse to *D.O.A.* or *Kiss Me Deadly*, where the retroactive narrative structure confers meaning on events after the fact, because *The Maltese*

[7] Žižek suggests that a story in which events are presented *in reverse order*, which is to say from end to beginning, can make visible the radical contingency of the enchainment of narrative. He insists that instead of a feeling of 'total fatalism' – which is the case in *Double Indemnity*, where the flashback structure means that everything is decided in advance – such an approach would 'make us experience in almost palpable way the utter contingency of the narrative sequence, i.e., the fact that, at every turning point, things might have taken another direction' (ibid., p. 69). However, such a reversal is not necessary, only an inattentive viewer is required: recall Ed Sikov's admission that he did not realise it would be Gillis floating in the pool at the end of Sunset Blvd.

[8] Rashna Wadia, 'So Many Fragments, So Many Beginnings, So Many Pleasures: The Neglected Detail(s) in Film Theory', *Criticism*, 45, no. 2 (2003), 173-195 (p. 184).

[9] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans., Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 13.

*Falcon* in fact retroactively confers *unmeaning* on the narrative at its close. The statue is revealed to be an imitation – 'Fake! It's a phoney! It's lead, it's lead! It's a fake...' – and all the blood that has been spilt for its sake has been spilt in vain. Archer, Thursby and Jacoby, who eventually all died for the "black bird", have died for *nothing*. With this revelation it becomes clear that Sam Spade's whole endeavour was, from the start, *meaningless*. There is a complete narrative *décapitonnage*. This realisation requires a complete re-evaluation; it necessitates a total reconsideration of the preceding plot. Indeed, Wadia points to the numerous 'loose ends', the unanswered questions that remain at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, such as, where was Iva Archer on the night of her husband's murder, how did Gutman trace the Russian general, was Wilmer really just "careless with matches", and so on.[10] Such questions persist at the film's end but Wadia argues that all this is lost with the ending of the film, suggesting that, 'the viewer is not allowed to confront or question the chaos.'[11] More interestingly, Wadia ends with another question: 'What would a film theory of loose ends look like?'[12] One possible answer could necessitate a return to the Lacanian set theory explored in the previous chapters, this time moving from considerations of cinematic discourse to notions of "open" and "closed" in the filmic narrative.

Žižek gives an excellent example of the sort of narrative closing that can be brought about at the end of a story in his discussion of the role of the classic deduction-sleuth detective – such as Holmes, or more appropriately, Dupin – as Lacanian "subject supposed to know". "Supposed to know what?" Žižek asks. 'The true meaning of our act (…). The detective's domain, as well as that of the psychoanalyst, is thus thoroughly the domain of meaning.'[13] The detective's apparent omniscience is akin to the image the analysand has of the analyst as the one who knows what is wrong: the *meaning* of the

[10] See Wadia, 'Fragments', p. 184.
[11] Ibid., p. 184.
[12] Ibid., p. 184.
[13] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 57.

symptom.[14] Žižek compares the scattered, seemingly undecipherable clues at the crime scene to the analysand's free associations: a chaos that, through the process of analysis, acquires order and significance because the detective-analyst, 'solely by means of his presence, guarantees that all these details will retroactively acquire meaning.'[15] For example, at the end of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Dupin explains the bizarre and seemingly impossible events – the strange voice, the hair that wasn't human, the locked room, the body in the chimney – to the narrator, offering a perfectly logical reason for each feature – the sailor, the orang-utan, the straight-razor – so that everything is accounted for, the meaning of everything is explained.[16] The detective's reconstruction grants the story closure, organising it into a meaningful whole.

*Gilda* would seem to present a paradigmatic example of the closed ending: in melodramatic fashion, the villain-obstacle (Mundson) is removed, allowing The Couple (Johnny and Gilda) to come together in the final scene, and then leave the film arm-in-arm, followed by an emphatic "*The End*" title. Furthermore, the detective, Obregon, functions in the classical mode identified by Žižek, as guarantor of meaning: a *phallic* figure, an imaginary authority to preserve the integrity of the symbolic system. The film is structured around Gilda's image as dangerous, promiscuous woman, and in the mode of the "retroactive noir", a penultimate scene finally quilts the meaning of this image: it was nothing but a performance designed to make Johnny jealous. The question of meaning continually raised throughout the film – as discussed in Chapter 1 – is answered; the $S_1$... finds its final $S_2$ as Detective Obregon restores order. He tells Johnny, 'Gilda didn't do any of those things you've been losing sleep over, not any of

[14] Of course, the analyst *does not know* and must avoid assuming this position in analysis – offering only questions and enigmas during the session – but this is the reason the analysand comes to the clinic in the first place.
[15] Ibid., p. 58.
[16] There still remains, however, a loose end: Adolphe Le Bon. Why was he arrested and imprisoned? What service had he done for Dupin? This point will be explored below, with recourse once again to notions of the "whole" and the "all".

them. It was just an act, every bit of it. And I'll give you credit, you were a great audience Mr. Fallon.' Gilda then, like the Maltese Falcon, is revealed to be a "phoney". But unlike the Falcon, this bird has a heart of gold instead of lead. The detective reveals her to have been "good" all along, finally imbuing her "performance" with meaning. Mary Ann Doane in fact situates the ending of Gilda under just such a phallic function, which she describes as 'the ultimate gesture of recuperation', offered by the male characters 'Johnny, the detective, Uncle Pio – who surround Gilda with their benevolence, who accept her into the fold – of meaning, of knowledge, of sense.'[17] Obregon in particular confers a sense of consistency on the narrative, ensuring that the social order is restored at the end by bringing Johnny and Gilda together. He sanctions their relationship – despite the crimes committed – admitting, 'I'm certainly a pushover for a good love story.' Žižek states that, '[t]he very presence of the [classical] detective guarantees in advance the transformation of the lawless sequence into a lawful sequence; in other words, the reestablishment of "normality",' and in *Gilda* it is the Law itself that ensures the pair's survival, protecting Johnny and Uncle Pio from punishment for Mundson's death: 'Besides, didn't you ever hear of a thing called "justifiable homicide"?' [18]

However, this final order is perhaps not enough to overcome or contain the uncertainty, the openness that *Gilda* has presented. Doane's analysis of the film is in fact sensitive to the fallibility of the phallic function. It cannot wholly contain what has gone before; the normative function of closure has been undermined. As mentioned in Chapter 1, she persuasively argues this in terms of an 'epistemological trouble' that is indexed to Gilda's femininity, her "unknowability" as femme fatale: the film thus becoming almost an extension of 'Put the Blame on Mame', a song which blames

[17] Doane, 'Gilda', p. 25.
[18] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 58.

female sexuality for a number of disasters.[19] On their reconciliation Gilda tells Johnny, 'Isn't it wonderful, because nobody has to apologise, because we were both such stinkers, weren't we? Isn't it wonderful?' But it isn't wonderful: the ending is manifestly *unsatisfactory*. The revelation of her essential goodness is not wholly credible. The *appearance* of Gilda as dangerous is too strong to be fully contained or controlled by the detective's discourse. The film's ending attempts to undermine this challenge to authority but is itself undermined by the subversive power of the very challenge: as Doane notes, '[t]he ending does not "work" precisely because the image of volatile sexuality attached to Gilda is too convincing.'[20] The uncertainty presented by Gilda is too much for the *point de capiton* to overcome; even the prison bar-like pinstripe of her sensible grey suit cannot contain her subversive potential. Beyond, for example, the question of Mundson's tungsten monopoly and the fascist sub-plot – a loose end that is never tied off – there is in *Gilda* a more profound point at stake, a question unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. Laura Mulvey has suggested that closure cannot simply and retroactively erase preceding events: the very fact that it *did* take place in the film is too strong.[21] This begs the question: Where does the burden of meaning lie? *Gilda* continually brings meaning into question, and ultimately points to an opening, an uncertainty in its own narrative *capitonnage*.[22]

[19] Doane, 'Gilda', p. 10.
[20] Ibid., p. 15.
[21] This point was suggested by Laura Mulvey during the discussion following her paper on Max Ophuls, given at King's College London, 28 January 2009. Mulvey was referring to the depiction of queer characters in certain films, who were often punished or removed in some way at the end. This did not, for Mulvey, diminish the fact that their relationships *did* appear on screen during the course of the film, which was enough to challenge or undermine the emphasis on their demise.
[22] Once again, the aim here is not to comment on the construction of gender or the specific role of sexuality in film noir – which is Doane's project in her analysis of *Gilda* – it is instead to interrogate the structures at work in such a film in relation to the theories of structuration that Lacan called "masculine" and "feminine". However, just as there was an interesting coincidence between the exploration of masculinity and noir in Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street* and what was identified as Krutnik's "masculine" topology of noir, here again is there a coincidence, this time between Doane's understanding of the feminine as epistemological trouble and the possible suggestion of "openness" in the ending of *Gilda*.

What *Gilda* presents is then a *sutured* narrative. This of course returns Copjec's notion of the sutured set – discussed in the previous chapter – to its origin in her work: in the detective story.[23] An "openness" persists despite the narrative closure that is offered. It is almost as though the narrative *requires* there be an element left out or left over, a loose end that is never finally tied: recall Paul Verhaeghe's image of the sliding tile puzzle that must leave one space empty in order to function. Far from being a simple closure, suture insists upon a gap, a constitutive lack. Copjec describes this in terms of the paradox of the locked room and the logic 'which allows the corpse to be pulled out of an apparently sealed space.'[24] She explains that the focus should not be on the corpse itself – such as Poe's Madame L'Espanaye – but on the conditions of suture, which is to say the presence of 'an element (…) added to the structure in order to mark what is lacking in it.'[25] This Miller associates with the concept of zero, and Copjec rightly identifies as Lacan's *objet (a)*: the excess element that designates the internal limit of the (Real-within-the-) Symbolic. For Copjec, it is this limit that 'guarantees the infinity of [the room's] contents, guarantees that an unlimited number of objects may be pulled out of it;' it constitutes the "room" as always-already "open" to the possibility of one signifier more.[26] Similarly then, the paradoxical status of the meaning brought about by suture – which is to say, for instance, the narrative *capitonnage* offered at the end of *Gilda* – is that the indefinite slippage (*glissement*) of signification is, as Copjec has explained, 'brought to a halt and allowed to function "as if" it were a closed set through the inclusion of an element that acknowledges the impossibility of closure.'[27] To extend the stitching metaphor, the *point de capiton* cannot entirely suture the gap, but instead leaves a scar that at once both closes and renders impossible the total closure

[23] And quite explicitly in the previous reference to Poe's *Rue Morgue* to the locked-room paradox. Working with the Lacanian theory and similar subject matter, is it perhaps inevitable that this project be drawn to the same conclusion?
[24] Copjec, *Read*, p. 175.
[25] Ibid., p. 175.
[26] Ibid., pp. 175-176.
[27] Ibid., p. 174.

of the wound. The "closed" narrative cannot therefore constitute a meaningful "whole", only a signifying "all" – a sutured, as-if-closed set – that requires an unresolved (and unresolvable) element: for *Gilda*, in the specific instance of the tungsten monopoly as well as the general, and overwhelming, feeling of uncertainty or unknowability that pervades the final scenes.[28]

However, while *Gilda* offers an attempted recuperation through meaning in its closing scenes, *The Maltese Falcon*, in insisting ultimately on *unmeaning* rather than meaning, is perhaps an even more radically open narrative discourse. The story might seem "all tied up" at the end, with Brigid's confession and the capture of Gutman's gang and there still remains the necessary "loose ends" (as identified by Wadia), but the revelation that the priceless statue they have all been pursuing is a fake – a process of alchemy in reverse with gold turned into base metal – has the most profound destabilising effect imaginable. The whole "meaning" of the narrative is false: it is no meaning at all. Such a move bears the mark of the Lacanian *lalangue*: the shattering of language, or what was described in Chapter 2 as the impossible complex of language effects, the erratic, polysemous and equivocal effects of the signifier. The narrative *stumbles* over its *point de capiton*; instead of enabling meaning, the punctuating mark in *The Maltese Falcon* refuses to make sense. It marks the failure of the narrative discourse. *Gilda* certainly attempts throughout to undermine any stable meaning-making – which could in itself be interpreted as a "feminine" or *lalinguistique* process – but nonetheless it still relies upon the (compromised) *point de capiton* and this is the very condition of the sutured, masculine structure. *The Maltese Falcon* subverts entirely the structure of retroactive meaning-making itself, turning the *point de capiton* on its head, from the determiner of meaning to the guarantor of nonsense: this is a *lalinguistique* effect par excellence. At the very place where the *point de capiton*

[28] As suggested above, in *Rue Morgue*, this element is represented by M. Le Bon.

intervenes, the site where the signifying effect (meaning, or the signified) should come into being there is just dross: the dead materiality of the leaden Falcon. Meaning is found to be lacking. To recall the structure presented in the Graph of Desire, the barred Other ($\not{A}$) is found in the locus of (A), the big Other, at the site of the signification of the Other, *s*(A): it now becomes *the precise point at which nonmeaning is produced in meaning*, or perhaps, *s*($\not{A}$).

Even fuller expression of this open narrative discourse is given, in spectacular fashion, by another noir: *Kiss Me Deadly*. Equally as important to the history of the noir category as *The Maltese Falcon* – recall that Borde and Chaumeton described the former as 'the desperate flip side' to the latter – *Kiss Me Deadly*, or at least a certain version of the film, presents a far more literal example of a *lalinguistique* narrative "shattering".[29] Until 1997, a common print of Aldrich's film (on 16mm and home video) ended in a way quite different from the finale shot in 1954. As Alain Silver has pointed out, this version omits scenes number 305 and 307, which show Mike Hammer and Velda escaping the house and clutching each other on the beach.[30] The "truncated" ending to *Kiss Me Deadly*, familiar to many viewers before 1997 (and indeed to those after: this alternate ending is included as a DVD "extra feature"), presents a stunningly different conclusion: without the shots of Hammer and Velda, the Malibu beach house simply explodes in an atomic fireball with everyone presumably annihilated in the blast. This vicious and astonishingly bleak conclusion brings all meaning into question.[31] The movie *finishes* but there is no possible *closure*. It certainly gives the Aristotelian sense of ending – that "there is nothing else after" – but in such an astonishing fashion that any *sense* at all is impossible. The sense of closure is quite literally *exploded*, blown

[29] Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 155.
[30] Alain Silver, 'Kiss Me Deadly – Evidence of a Style', *FNR*, pp. 209-235 (p. 228). Silver first notes this anomaly in the third edition of the *Encyclopedic Reference*, p. 370.
[31] A meta-historical note at this point: *Kiss Me Deadly* is often read in terms of a Cold War absurd universe where the atomic bomb and potential nuclear holocaust have rendered the world meaningless.

apart. The "End" title itself seems to explode out of the house, and with it goes any possibility of *capitonnage*. Glenn Erickson observes that even the score in this ending is chopped off mid bar.[32] There is no resolution, just an explosion of pure narrative contingency. As an "ending" it is *lalinguistique* in the extreme: a forceful opening-out of the discourse. It does not so much unknot the *point de capiton* as detonate it. Coherence, consistency, signification: all are consumed in the nuclear fire. However, Silver has shown that Aldrich himself had no knowledge of this version of the film, pointing to an interview with Edward Arnold and Eugene Miller where he states:

> I have never seen a print without, repeat, without Hammer and Velda stumbling in the surf. That's the way it was shot, that's the way it was released; the idea being that Mike was left alive long enough to see what havoc he had caused, though certainly he and Velda were both seriously contaminated.[33]

This ending is certainly less radical but – as the director himself suggests – opens up far more questions than it answers: What of Hammer's gunshot wound? Have the pair been exposed to the radiation? Fatally so? What exactly *was* "the great whatsit"? These are not "loose ends" that can be sutured, elided by some great, final explanatory point because none is offered; they are total uncertainties that can never be resolved.[34]

As a further point of comparison, in the case of these films noirs at least, a MacGuffin plays – to a lesser or greater degree – a role in the possible open-endedness of the narrative. And while *Gilda* uses an entire subplot as its MacGuffin – which is itself not *central* to the potential openness, being rather more a simple loose end – both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *The Maltese Falcon* rely on an object (the whatsit, the statue) that plays a crucial role in both the progression of the narrative and its ultimate opening-out. Of course, in a Lacanian filmic analysis, where the term "MacGuffin" appears, the name

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[32] Glenn Erickson, 'The Kiss Me Mangled Mystery: Refurbishing a Film Noir', *Images*, Issue 3, http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue03/features/kmd1.htm. Accessed 9th August 2010.

[33] Edwin T. Arnold and Eugene L Miller, *The Films and Career of Robert Aldrich* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), p. 246, quoted in Silver, 'Kiss Me Deadly', p. 229.

[34] It should be noted that in each case there insists the "possibility of one signifier more": masculine and feminine structuration refer to two responses to such a possibility, which exists in an asymmetrical relation to each other. To reiterate the lesson of the Lacanian theory of sets, the "closed" and "open" discourses do not in any way complement each other.

Žižek must surely follow. Žižek has famously identified the MacGuffin – the 'pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion' – as 'the *objet petit a*, a gap in the centre of the symbolic order – the lack, the void of the Real setting in motion the symbolic movement of interpretation, a pure semblance of the Mystery to be explained.'[35] Indeed, for the characters in both films, the object is manifestly this Lacanian object, the object-cause of desire: *objet (a).*[36] In fact, the Maltese Falcon is often cited as the paradigmatic example of a MacGuffin above and beyond any of Hitchcock's objects.[37] In her intriguing story/essay on the fate of the falcon props used in the shooting of the film, Vivian Sobchack characterises the Falcon statue – as both fictional item and piece of movie memorabilia – as 'an *Ur-souvenir* of unfulfilled longing' and 'an object of desire (indeed, as a *meta*-object of desire).'[38] She also points to a curious poetical study by John Jenkins and Ken Bolton, entitled *The Gutman Variations*, which presents an imagined monologue for Caspar Gutman as he opines on the priceless black bird. Described in a press release as their 'aphoristic and meditative study of Lacan' and by Sobchack as a 'powerful, poignant, and funny "materialist" parody of Lacanian "desire",' *The Gutman Variations* does indeed read like a well-observed study of the subject in the throes of its affair with the *objet (a)*.[39] The imagined "Gutman" explains, 'If I had/ the bird sir/ I would not throw it away, I would put it on the counter/ and say bank that. No sir – throw it away? – I don't like that sir.'[40] For Gutman the quest for the statue goes on: he leaves Spade's office (with Cairo in tow) to pursue once more the object-cause of his desire. Gutman participates fully in the infinite metonymy of desire;

[35] Žižek, 'Introduction', in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. by Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 1-12 (pp. 6 & 8).
[36] Lacan's own favourite MacGuffin was of course the purloined letter.
[37] This occurs in numerous popular writing handbooks, such as Oakley M Hall's *How Fiction Works: Proven Secrets to Writing Successful Stories That Hook Readers and Sell* (Cincinnati: Story Press, 2001).
[38] Sobchack, 'Chasing the Maltese Falcon: On the Fabrications of a Film Prop', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6, no. 2 (2007), 219-246 (p. 239).
[39] Press Release, http://members.ozemail.com.au/~writerslink/PressPress/PressPress_Bolton_Jenkins.html. Accessed 14th August 2010; Sobchack, 'Chasing', p. 235.
[40] Ken Bolton and John Jenkins, *The Gutman Variations*, http://www.eaf.asn.au/otis/jjkb.html. Accessed 14th August 2010. This curious poem also contains some rather amusing lines, such as 'Fort Da is neither here nor there sir – to me.'

when, in the course of the film, he finally gets his hands on the statue, he realises “that’s not it”, it is a fake and the perpetual, open-ended pursuit continues. The MacGuffin, as *objet (a)*, ensures this open-endedness.

## 2. *The Maltese Falcon* = √-1

Without doubt, the Maltese Falcon statue functions as *objet (a)* for the characters such as Gutman and Cairo. Spade's cod-Shakespearean description of the statue as 'the stuff that dreams are made of' is exactly right: object, statue, dreams, they are all "made" of *desire*. Indeed, Naremore reads the Falcon story as 'a parable about art and surplus value, showing how a fetish object is created through the sheer power of myth,' which chimes almost exactly with Žižek's insistence in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that, 'Marxian surplus-value announces effectively the logic of the Lacanian *object petit a*.'[41] There is a danger, however, that the Falcon becomes an entirely overdetermined Lacanian object in such discussions, and Sobchack notes that it is perhaps, above all 'an immaterial heuristic device that enables theoretical and philosophical speculation.'[42] However, there *is* one other way in which the Falcon must be considered in this discussion: if, in a filmic sense, it functions *for the characters* as *objet (a)*, then, at the cinematic level, it functions *for the audience* – in narrative terms – in a manner that can be understood in terms of Lacan's discussion of √-1.

In 1966 Lacan attended Charles Morazé's paper on 'Literary Invention', given at Johns Hopkins University's *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* conference. During the discussion of the concept of "invention" following the paper, the organiser, Richard Macksey, offered the following observation: 'one day someone decided that the symbol "*i*" had to be invented, and that the symbol would be defined: "$i^2$ equals -1" and that solved all kinds of problems.'[43] Lacan's own use of √-1 as a theoretical tool – which in fact predates this conference by at least seven years – similarly presents a solution to a given problem, in this case concerning the structure

[41] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 254; Žižek, *SOI*, p. 50.
[42] Sobchack, 'Chasing', p. 234.
[43] Charles Morazé, 'Literary Invention', in *The Structuralist Controversy*, pp. 22-55 (p. 39). Lacan's own intervention in the discussion picks up on the "imaginary root", apropos of which he goes on to ask, 'Who invents?' (p. 42).

and function of the Symbolic order. It did of course present its own problems – to lazy readers of the *Écrits*, for example – and Lacan is in fact aware of the apparent incongruity of introducing such a notion into psychoanalytical discussion. In *Le Désir et son interprétation*, he says to his audience, 'I am asking you to accept the following notation – I would even allow myself to be so ridiculous as to refer to a notation of [root] -1 concerning the Imaginaries.'[44]

Arkady Plotnitsky offers an interesting commentary on Lacan's √-1; he does, however, deal mainly with the now infamous remarks on the phallus and attempts – unnecessarily – to decouple the mathematical metaphors from Lacan's prose.[45] But Plotnitsky *does* argue for the importance of understanding the function of Lacan's "mathematics" in psychoanalytic theory and furthermore, he suggests that, 'one has indeed to know something not only about Lacan but also about imaginary and complex numbers and their history.'[46] This necessitates a return to the concept of the line of real numbers, first mentioned in Chapter 2: real numbers correspond to quantities on a continuum, points along an infinitely long line that can be used for measurement. Plotnitsky explains that, in this domain 'the square root can be defined, can be given unambiguous mathematical meaning, only for positive numbers' and that, 'square roots of negative numbers (...) do not exist, at least in the way that real numbers exist or appear to exist.'[47] There is, therefore, no point on the real number line that would correspond to √-1. As Reinhard Remmert explains, '[t]he quadratic equation $x^2 + 1 = 0$ has no solutions in the field R of real numbers, because every sum of squares $r^2 + 1$ with

[44] Lacan, S6 (3/6/1959). Lacan in fact pre-empts his critics, explaining in 'The Subversion of the Subject' that, '[t]his is why, at the risk of incurring a certain amount of opprobrium, I have indicated how far I have gone in distorting mathematical algorithms in my own use of them: for example, my use of the symbol, √-l, also written *i* in the theory of complex numbers, can obviously be justified only if I give up any claim to its being able to be used automatically in subsequent operations' (pp. 695-696).
[45] See Arkady Plotnitsky, *The Knowable and the Unknowable: Modern Science, Nonclassical Thought and the Two Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 113-115.
[46] Ibid., p. 115.
[47] Ibid., p. 121.

r € IR is positive.'[48] The answer was to assume the existence of an imaginary number, *i*, that *would* allow such an equation to be solved even if its value could not be designated among the real numbers. It is such an assumption that will be crucial both to Lacanian theory and the understanding of noir that will follow.

A key theorist in the development of this concept, Leonhard Euler, commented that, 'the square roots of negative numbers cannot be reckoned among the possible numbers (...). This circumstance leads us to the concept of numbers, which by their very nature are impossible, and which are commonly called *imaginary* numbers (...) because they exist only in our (...) imagination.'[49] The imagination is of course *not* what is meant by the Lacanian Imaginary, but the function that these numbers perform in the development of mathematics *does* have a correlation with the psychoanalytic concept. This mathematical innovation allowed for the introduction of the field of "complex numbers", which Plotnitsky explains, 'in general are written in the form $a + bi$, where $a$ and $b$ are real numbers,' and of which $\sqrt{-1}$ is the simplest example. This then allowed for the solution of certain polynomial equations, which Plotnitsky describes as 'one of the most beautiful and important theorems in mathematics.'[50] In sum, Plotnitsky suggests that, the mathematical (and Lacanian) $\sqrt{-1}$ enables the introduction of a new field or system that 'allows one to deal with problems that arise within previously established situations but that cannot be solved by their means.'[51]

Lacan is fully aware of both this history of and importance to mathematics regarding the concept of the imaginary number. In *L'Identification*, Lacan gives a brief description of the 'elementary arithmetic' of $\sqrt{-1}$: that there is no (real) number that could fulfill the function of being the root of a negative number because 'any number squared cannot give a negative number, since all negative numbers squared become

[48] Reinhold Remmert, 'Complex Numbers', in *Numbers*, ed. by Heinz-Dieter Ebbinghaus, et al. (New York: Springer, 1991), pp. 55-96 (p. 55).
[49] Leonhard Euler, *Elements of Algebra*, Chapter 13, Article 143, quoted in ibid., p59.
[50] Plotnitsky, *The Knowable*, p. 121.
[51] Ibid., p. 144.

positive.'[52] Furthermore, he introduces the concept of the complex number as 'any number composed of a real number "a" to which there is joined an imaginary number [a + *i*b]' and notes that, 'you can perform with this complex number, and with the same success, all the operations that you can perform with real numbers.'[53] And in *La Logique du fantasme*, he re-emphasises the importance of the concept of the imaginary number that 'now intervenes in all calculations, in the most common fashion, to ground what is called – extending real numbers – *the complex numbers*.'[54]

In *L'Objet de la psychanalyse*, Lacan discusses the historical context of the imaginary number in mathematics, pointing to Descartes' struggle with negative numbers and roots.[55] It was of course Descartes who first coined the term, stating in *The Geometry* that, '[n]either the true nor the false roots are always real; sometimes they are imaginary; that is, while we can always conceive of as many roots for each equation as I have already assigned, yet there is not always a definite quantity corresponding to each root so conceived of.'[56] And even in this originary expression can there be found a suggestion of the confluence of the mathematical and Lacanian Imaginaries. This is made clearer in an echo of another of the great theorists of √-1, Gottfried Leibniz, when Lacan refers to the "irrational" as 'an image, a mathematical metaphor' concerning the concept of the imaginary number: he states that, '[t]he square root of minus one doesn't correspond to anything that is subject to our intuition, anything real – in the mathematical sense of the term – and yet, it must be conserved, along with its full function.'[57] The *function* of the imaginary number is vital to mathematics, even if its

[52] Lacan, *Le Séminaire IX: L'Identification, 1960-1961*, unpublished manuscript. Session 10/1/1961.
[53] Ibid.. It should be added that, *pace* Lacan, *b* is also a real number; *i* designates the imaginary.
[54] Lacan, *S14* (12/4/1967), original emphasis.
[55] See Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIII: L'Objet de la psychanalyse, 1965-1966*, unpublished manuscript. Session 15/12/1965.
[56] René Descartes, *The Geometry*, trans. by DE Smith and ML Latham (New York: Dover, 1954), p. 175.
[57] Lacan, *S6* (22/4/1959); published as 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', trans. by James Hulbert, *YFS*, 55/56 (1977), 11-52 (pp. 28-29). Leibniz stated that, '[f]rom the irrationals are born the impossible or imaginary quantities whose nature is very strange but whose usefulness is not to be despised' (Quoted in Remmert, 'Complex', p. 55). Plotnitsky draws a similar comparison: see *The Knowable*, p. 145.

value cannot be counted within the realm of "real numbers". The correspondence to Lacanian theory here is not direct; the field of "real" numbers is not of course the Lacanian Real and while it would be unnecessary to identify them absolutely, it could perhaps be useful to consider this field in terms of the Symbolic (as was the case in Chapter 2). In both cases is it necessary to take recourse to another order – designated Imaginary – that confers a certain consistency on that first field. For the signifier, this imaginary realm is of course that of meaning and the signified.[58] This, Lacan explains, 'is why the root of minus 1 is nothing but algorithm, but it is an algorithm that is of use [*C'est pourquoi √-1 n'est rien qu'un algorithme, mais c'est un algorithme qui sert*].'[59]

As such, Lacan's commentary on the relation between the (-1) and the set of signifiers – first introduced in Chapter 2 – can now be completed. In 'The Subversion of the Subject' he states,

> Now insofar as the battery of signifiers is, it is complete, and this signifier [S(Ⱥ)] can only be a line that is drawn from its circle without being able to be counted in it. This can be symbolized by the inherence of a (-1) in the set of signifiers.
> It is, as such, unpronounceable, but its operation is not, for the latter is what occurs whenever a proper name is pronounced. Its statement is equal to its signification.
> Hence, by calculating this signification according to the algebra I use, namely:
>
> $$\frac{\text{S (signifier)}}{\text{s (signified)}} = \text{s (the statement)}$$
>
> with S = (-1), we find: $s = \sqrt{-1}$.[60]

Given the presence of a (-1) within the set of all signifiers – which is to say that, recalling Chapter 2, the set cannot be totalised because there always lacks a final signifier, that there is no Other of the Other – the Symbolic order is still able to signify thanks to what could be considered an "imaginary" function: √-1.

Lacan appears to suggest that this "imaginary" operation is in evidence "whenever a proper name is pronounced". Apropos of this, Fink notes that the proper

[58] In *S3* Lacan describes his orders as 'the symbolic, represented by the signifier, [and] the imaginary, represented by meaning' (p. 63).
[59] Lacan, *S9* (10/01/1961).
[60] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 694.

name can be considered a (-1) with regard to the set of signifiers because '[t]he process of naming shows that the set of all signifiers is missing something.'[61] Naming often involves the introduction of a new signifier to the set (A) – Fink's example is "Internet" – that was not previously part of the set but must now be counted amongst its elements, suggesting that this signifier was, in a sense, *missing from the Symbolic*.[62] This suggests that each time a name is used the lack in the Other is glimpsed before being covered over once more by imaginary wholeness. However, this is not limited to the instance of the proper name, which is but Lacan's example of the "unpronounceable operation"; the imaginary function, Lacan's formula makes clear, pertains to the process of signification as such. Indeed, Fink suggests – not unreasonably, given that Lacan claims to be "calculating signification" with his algebra – that, 'we have to assume (or speculate) that signification is being denoted here by Lacan as S/s (the signifier over the signified).'[63]

Therefore, taken as the general formula for signification as such, Lacan's "algebra" reveals that this effect – the production of the signified, or meaning, by the signifier – is an *imaginary* function comparable to √-1 (and the mathematical imaginary which gave rise to the field of complex numbers). The function is "unpronounceable" because it does not pertain to the Symbolic but the Imaginary, which exist in a necessary ratio comparable to that of the fields of real and imaginary numbers. Nowhere in the network of signifiers does meaning reside: a certain function must therefore be assumed, which Lacan designates "signification". The lack in the Other is a condition of *every* enunciation; every signifier is subtended by this void. This leads to Lacan's well-known conclusion that, '[n]o authoritative statement has any other guarantee here [in the Other as the "locus of the signifier"] than in its very enunciation, which could in no

[61] Fink, *LTL*, p. 133.
[62] Cf. the discussion of Russell's paradox, A and $\not A$ in Chapter 2.
[63] Fink, *LTL*, p. 133. Fink does note, however, that in *S19*, Lacan insists that, '[t]here is a big difference between the signifier/signified relationship and signification. Signification constitutes (fait) a sign, and a sign has nothing to do with a signifier' (02/12/1971).

way appear outside that locus. I formulate this by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other.'[64] To overcome the paradox of the lack in the Other recourse must be taken to the imaginary function, in the same way that, in order to overcome the formal contradiction of the "inexistence" of √-1, mathematics was compelled to articulate the theory of imaginary numbers. In both cases then, the presence of (-1) within the set of signifiers requires a function: √-1 or *i*. Meaning does not, however, provide an absolutely Other locus from which the Symbolic can be determined; indeed, in his Seminar *RSI*, Lacan situates meaning at the intersection of the Symbolic and the Imaginary in his Borromean knot of R,S and I.[65] Just as imaginary numbers cannot be said to "exist" (within the field of real numbers) but nonetheless have an effect within that field, the Lacanian Imaginary exerts its influence over the Symbolic, imbuing it with meaning, filling out the inert letters that make up the neutral matrix of signifiers with its signifieds. Meaning is therefore, as a response to or a result of the lack in the Other (-1), an imaginary function that can be understood in a similar manner to the mathematical concept of *i*.

It is now perhaps possible to begin unlocking the formulation, *The Maltese Falcon* = √-1. The statue is of course revealed to be a fake – the very locus of unmeaning – at the film's end. In short, the statue (as MacGuffin) is just such an imaginary number, that "does not exist" but in the presence of which certain calculations are made possible. The black bird is only a worthless lump of lead – nothing but a meaningless "algorithm" – but, in terms of the narrative, *it is a lump of lead that is of use*. Lacan notes that it is from the development of the mathematical imaginary that 'emerged what can be called the complex number, that is to say one of the most useful and fruitful things that have been created in mathematics.'[66] Equally, it

[64] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 688.
[65] See Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXII: RSI, 1974-1975*, unpublished manuscript. Session 10/12/1974.
[66] Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIX: Le Savoir du psychanalyste, 1971-1972*, unpublished manuscript. Session of 1/6/1972.

is from the development of the legend surrounding the "priceless" statue that emerges the entire fabric of the plot of *The Maltese Falcon*. The film's "Charles V" prologue and Gutman's paean to the 'glorious golden Falcon, crusted from head to foot with the finest jewels' are as fecund as Descartes' and Euler's creation. Without the assumption of such a value, *The Maltese Falcon* could not function. If the statue were thought to be worthless from the outset, then Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Joel Cairo would never have entered Spade and Archer's office, Miles Archer would never have walked down that blind alley, and so on. In short, without this MacGuffin, *there would be no film*. The film then proceeds from an utter void of meaninglessness, which begs a question: if the Maltese Falcon of Gutman's dreams "does not exist", how then does it come to exert such influence over the film's narrative? This can – in the light of Lacan's theory of √-1 – perhaps be reframed thus: how *does* the Falcon signify, if it is nothing but a meaningless fake? The statue is found to be situated at the very site of the lack in the Other ($\not{A}$), but nonetheless, it is imbued with significance throughout the film: *s*(A), the signification of the Other or meaning-making process, functions. Indeed, it is worth nothing that, on the left hand side of the Graph of Desire, between these two loci Lacan places the formula for fantasy ($ <> *a*) that – while involving its own logic not to be explored in detail here – as the "fantasmatic support" of inconsistent, everyday reality, points to a similar imaginary function as that of the value of √-1.[67]

This notion of "value" is crucial both to the function of the statue and Lacan's theory of meaning. Recall from Chapter 1 Saussure's suggestion that the meaning of a sign was determined by its "value", which is to say its differential relation to all other signs. The linguistic value of the sign is what constitutes it as a meaningful unit, what allows it to make sense. Saussure is explicit on this, having stated: 'value, as defined, can be equated with meaning' and discusses the value of a five franc coin by way of

[67] See Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 692.

analogy.[68] Apropos of Lacan's revised Saussureanism, Joël Dor relates this function of delimitation to the *point de capiton* as the point which gives signifiers meaning, which imbues them with value.[69] Recall too that Lacan insists, '[e]verything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier,' and thus the Falcon, as the film's *point de capiton*, imbues the narrative with meaning; it is itself imbued with meaning throughout as everything relates back to the statue and its significance.[70] As Sobchack notes, crucial to the unfolding of *The Maltese Falcon* is 'the question of *what* [the statue] is (that is, its function) – and, intimately related, the question of its *value* (that is, its meaning).'[71] Here Sobchack, like Saussure, explicitly connects the concepts of meaning and value, and emphasises the crucial role this "value" plays in relation to the narrative structure. Furthermore, to relate the statue to the imaginary function of fantasy, described above, Sobchack also describes the bird as the film's '"[l]ife-support" – a vital sustaining "prop"' that allows the narrative to develop.[72] The *meaning* of the statue is crucial to the film's narrative, and yet it is *meaningless*, an inherently worthless object like the Lacanian letter. David Lehman observes that, like the Falcon, the letter is empty and therefore, '[s]ince its meaning is to be guessed at and cannot be verified, its significance must be in some sense nearly arbitrary; the purloined letter, like paper money, is valuable only because people think it is.'[73] Beyond the film's prologue, the statue's diegetic value comes from Gutman, who discusses it in terms of 'extreme, immeasurable wealth', a million dollar bird. Spade notes the worth of the 'dingus' to Gutman when he tells him, 'I know the value in human life you people put on it'. The emphasis here should be on *the value you people put on it*. This places the function of

[68] Saussure, *Course*, p. 133.
[69] See Joël Dor, Introduction *to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured like a Language* (New York: Other Press, 1998), p. 39.
[70] Lacan, *S3*, p. 268.
[71] Sobchack, 'Chasing', p. 236, original emphasis.
[72] Ibid., p. 236.
[73] David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 88.

the statue firmly into the imaginary realm; the statue is assigned a value – in a sense, outside the realm of the film itself, since it is a fake, a "false value" – like that assigned to *i*, the imaginary number. It provides the film with a *meaningful* framework and yet it is at the end revealed to be the very point of *unmeaning*.

This can, moreover, be related to Catherine Malabou's theorisation of the relation between meaning and trauma, presented in *Les Nouveaux blessés*, and discussed by Žižek in his *Living in the End Times*. Malabou suggests that trauma is resistant to hermeneutics, that it is meaningless, an external shock resistant to any form of interpretation or integration. In the face of such devastating – *albeit profoundly different* – shocks as the Holocaust or the neurological destruction of Alzheimer's disease, Malabou suggests that, 'all hermeneutics is impossible.'[74] This could perhaps be considered the contingent irruption of the pure, tychic Lacan Real but the way in which Malabou formulates her theorisation of trauma positions it against the *nachträglich* understanding of such intrusions expounded by early psychoanalysis. Contra Freud, Malabou argues that such incursions are not effective because they resonate with some other, sexual trauma. As Žižek observes, in this conceptualisation, 'trauma remains external to the field of sense, it cannot be integrated into it as a mere deterrent which triggers the resuscitation of a latent psychic trauma.'[75] Malabou's concern is thus the utterly overwhelming traumas that can erase subjectivity entirely, whether psychological or physiological, and are experienced as an utter void of meaninglessness. Žižek suggests that, 'Malabou's basic reproach to Freud is that, when confronted with such cases, he succumbs to the temptation to look for meaning: he is not ready to accept the direct destructive power of external shocks.'[76] However, is the reverse therefore not also the case, that *meaninglessness is experienced as traumatic*? In everyday

[74] Catherine Malabou, *Les Nouveaux Blessés : De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), p. 29, quoted in Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 295.
[75] Žižek, *Living*, p. 295.
[76] Ibid., p. 293.

experience, is the response to "trauma" not dissimilar to Freud's own, clinical-intellectual need to give it meaning? Can the narrative unfolding of *The Maltese Falcon* not be understood as an automative response to the worthless, meaningless object at its heart? The construction of the film is an attempt to integrate this traumatic kernel into the realm of sense. Every effort of the film's narrative is an attempt to account for the void of meaning, constructing ever more elaborate intrigues and betrayals in an effort to mask the very lack that constitutes the statue, and therefore the film itself.

This sort of double status of the Falcon, as the point where lack and meaning coincide, is the most interestingly Lacanian dimension of the film. The equation of the Falcon with √-1 can in fact now shed some light on Lacan's comparison of the phallus to the imaginary number. In his essay, 'Plasticity, Paternity, Perversity: Freud's Falcon, Huston's Freud', Lee Edelman recognises the destabilisation of the word inherent to both the Falcon and the film itself. Edelman argues for the 'figural identification of the falcon and the phallus' as the object properly belonging to Father-King (Charles V), which 'institutes, defines, and participates in a symbolic economy of desire.'[77] The Falcon, like the phallus, is thus the signifier to which all others signify. Edelman then voices the question put forward by the film's narrative: 'But what if the falcon, and, by extension, the phallus, were not the unique and privileged signifier of the signifying system itself?'[78] Instead of a jewel encrusted treasure, it is a worthless imitation. *The Maltese Falcon* therefore reveals for Edelman,

> the illusory quality that attends [the phallus'] demarcation of signifiers (...), the fraudulence through which it articulates meaning by obscuring its own substitutive status as the thematic elaboration, within the order of thought, of the Thing that resists but occasions meaning while remaining, itself, unthinkable.[79]

The phallus is itself a fake, a lead dummy for the Real Thing. Like the King himself, the Falcon has dominion (over the film) – just as the phallus does over the

[77] Edelman, 'Plasticity', p. 80.
[78] Ibid., p. 80.
[79] Ibid., p. 80.

symbolic – but this authority is not derived from some inherent worth: it is but a function of this position, a symbolic mandate. In *Le Désir est son interprétation*, Lacan observes that Hamlet performs a similar conflation when he tells Guildenstern, 'The King is a thing –/ (...) Of nothing.'[80] In reading this portion of the play, Lacan implores his audience: 'I beg you simply to replace the word "king" with the word "phallus".'[81] The phallus then: a thing of nothing. Like the Falcon, it is positioned, valued above all things while being itself no-thing at all. This Žižek describes as the phallus *qua* 'erected Guarantee of Meaning.'[82] The Falcon, like the phallus, is the very element that Žižek identifies as representing, within the field of meaning, 'the agency of pure signifier – the element through which the signifier's non-sense erupts in the midst of Meaning – [that] is perceived as a point of extreme saturation of Meaning, as the point which "gives meaning" to all the others and thus totalizes the field of (…) meaning.'[83] The Falcon *qua* phallus functions within the film as guarantor: a "transcendent" Other that determines the meaning of the narrative that is, however, nothing but the placeholder of lack, of the lack of meaning as such. Žižek suggests that the element that holds together the entire symbolic edifice – this "phallic Guarantee of Meaning" – is precisely 'the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of (…) meaning.'[84] It both embodies and suppresses the radical contingency of meaning upon which its discourse depends.

It is in this respect that *The Maltese Falcon* can help to elucidate Lacan's (now infamous) suggestion that, 'the erectile organ [i.e. the phallus] can be equated with the √-1.'[85] Lacan situates meaning at the intersection of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, because meaning – engendered, that is, by the *point de capiton* – is but a product of the

[80] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene II.
[81] Lacan, *S6* (29/4/1959).
[82] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 99.
[83] Ibid., p. 99.
[84] Ibid., p. 100.
[85] Lacan, 'Subversion', p. 697.

relation between signifiers, a value assigned to meaningless letters.[86] This Lacan describes as a 'signification otherwise called a *signified effect*.'[87] As Frederic Jameson notes, 'the signified – the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance – is (…) to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves.'[88] The phallus, or more precisely, its *phallic signification* is therefore an imaginary number. It is an impossible value that nonetheless functions, providing a seeming plenitude of meaning that – like the Falcon – determines all other signifiers. Indeed, Žižek – who observes that, 'the "imaginary" number (the square root of -1) is the "meaning of phallus", its signified' – describes the phallus as the 'the element in which excess and lack coincide.'[89] Both the phallus and the Falcon stand for the point at which both meaning and nonmeaning are revealed. This imaginary realm of phallic signification is, Žižek suggests, an 'impossible fullness at the level of meaning (of the signified) (…) sustained by the void (…) at the level of the signifier.'[90] What *The Maltese Falcon* thus points to is Lacan's crucial, "final word" on the *point de capiton* in *Les Formations de l'inconscient*: 'The pinning [*épinglage*] of which I speak – the *point de capiton* – is only a mythical affair, because no one has ever pinned [*épingler*] a signification to a signifier. On the other hand, what one can do, is pin [*épingler*] a signifier to a signifier and see what that produces.'[91] The *point de capiton* "anchors" meanings to nothing, other than another signifier; it is only a knotting, a tying together of signifying chains that holds the matrix of signifiers in place. The *point de capiton* suspends the signifying chain in a

[86] To be clear, the phallus (Φ) could be considered *the point de capiton*, or determiner, of the Symbolic order as such; the individual *points de capiton* that function within the Symbolic repeat the function of the phallus at the signifier to signifier level.
[87] Lacan, *S14*, (14/12/66).
[88] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991), p. 26.
[89] Žižek, *Fright*, p. 60.
[90] Ibid., p. 60. Furthermore, Žižek suggests that, 'we encounter the 'meaning of phallus' when, apropos of some notion, we enthusiastically feel that 'this is *it*, the true thing, the true meaning', although we are never able to explicate *what*, precisely, this meaning *is*' (ibid., p. 60).
[91] Lacan, *S5*, p. 196. As with the reference to fantasy above, the Lacanian theory of myth involves a logic distinct to that of signification. It does, however, provide a similar imaginary, compensatory function.

meaningful position as it attempts to span the void of meaninglessness.[92] *The Maltese Falcon* can therefore be understood as just such an attempt to bridge the gap, suture the trauma of unmeaning; the statue can be understood as the phallus, whose imaginary value, its signification – equal to $\sqrt{-1}$ – is both the wound and the stitches that constitute the film.

[92] This would seem to situate Lacanian theory as a type of Kantian formalism, which, as Žižek observes, 'asserts an a priori 'transcendental' void around which the symbolic universe is structured, a void which can then be filled by a contingent positive object' (*Ticklish*, p. 276). However, Žižek suggests that the Lacanian Real constitutes a 'short circuit between form and content,' between the frame and what is enframed, that subverts any such "formalism" (ibid., p. 276).

### 3. The Necessary Fiction of Noir

*The Maltese Falcon* is concerned throughout with questions of truth and lies. The characters use a number of stories, lies and ruses both to conceal their true motives and achieve their aim of taking possession of the statue. The examples are numerous: Gutman of course uses a number of ploys to deceive Spade and get hold of the Falcon. Joel Cairo enters Spade's office as a client, but with the intention of sticking him up and searching the premises. Spade and Lt. Dundy have an argument in which Dundy accuses him of giving 'a lot of lying answers', and again, exclaims, 'you're a liar and I'm telling you so'. Spade has then to explain to the police why Cairo is sitting, bloodied in his office; he then tells Cairo, 'Sorry about the story's goofiness, a sensible one would have landed us in the cooler'. During an interrogation, the police tell Cairo, 'Try telling the facts', to which he replies, 'What... facts...?' There is, furthermore, a level of performance involved in these strategies. For example, during a confrontation with Gutman, Spade feigns outrage and leaves the room in a fit of temper; he then walks calmly away satisfied with his deception. And in his final discussion with Brigid, Spade tells her, 'Don't be so sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be. That sort of reputation might be good business, bring in high-priced jobs and make it easier to deal with the enemy'. *The Maltese Falcon* is a film in which appearances are almost always deceiving.

As the archetypal duplicitous femme fatale, much of this epistemological uncertainty of course rests with Brigid. As the plot develops, Spade sees her for what she is, telling her, 'You aren't exactly the sort of person you pretend to be, are you?' And as her untruths begin to unravel, he tells her, smiling, 'You're a liar'. They then have the following exchange:

> BRIGID: I am. I've always been a liar.
> SPADE: Well don't...don't brag about it. Was there any truth at all in that yarn?
> BRIGID: Some. Not very much.

(...)
BRIGID: Oh, I'm...I'm so tired, so tired of lying and of making up lies, not knowing...what is a lie and what is the truth.

However, what is perhaps most interesting, from a Lacanian perspective, in Brigid's long list of deceptions is the first suggestion that she is not everything that she makes herself out to be. During her second encounter with Spade, she tells him, 'Mr Spade, I have a terrible, terrible confession to make: that story I told you yesterday was just a story'. Her whole "Miss Wonderley" spiel about Thursby and a missing sister was nothing but a ruse, intended to involve Spade and Archer in the recovery of the Falcon without their knowledge. What distinguishes Brigid's story from a simple lie in this instance is what could be considered the complicity of the Other: the willingness on the part of the Other to believe such a discourse. Spade tells Brigid, 'We didn't believe your story (...) We believed your two hundred dollars'. He explains, 'I mean you paid us more than if you'd been telling the truth, and enough more to make it alright'. This revelation of a "lie" prefigures the revelation of the imitation statue at the film's climax, and in both cases is there a certain usefulness, a benefit to be gained if this "lie" is treated as if it were true.

This is very much the realm of the imaginary number: a "lie", or a non-existent entity whose presence allows a certain calculus to function. The most striking example of this is Spade's plot to find a "fall guy" to feed to the authorities. He tells the assorted conspirators gathered in his office (Gutman, Cairo and Wilmer) that, 'The police have got to have a victim; somebody they can pin those three murders on'. Seeing an opportunity to abuse Wilmer one final time, he suggests, 'Let's give them the gunsel'. This is of course, in part, a ruse on Spade's part to extract from Gutman the truth behind the murder and betrayals committed in the pursuit of the Falcon. He insists, 'Now let's get the details fixed first. Why did he shoot Thursby, and why and where and how did he shoot Captain Jacoby?' But it is also an invention necessary to exculpate himself and

the others; as if to prove that he is constructing an imaginary discourse, Spade explains that, 'I've got to know all that happened so I can be sure that the parts that don't fit are covered up'. Recall here Fink's observation that meaning – the imaginary dimension of language – pertains to that which fits, for instance with the ego's own self-image, and any element that does not fit must be repressed. Here Spade must occlude that which does not fit to construct his narrative. And if there were indeed any doubts that Spade is dealing with an imaginary number, that he is conjuring with that 'fine and wonderful resource of the human spirit, almost an *amphibian* between being and not being' that Leibniz called √-1, then they must be banished when he tells Gutman and Cairo, 'Let him [Wilmer] talk his head off, I guarantee nobody'll do anything about it'.[93] The fall guy presents a perfect solution to the problem they were facing – joint complicity in multiple murders, arson and theft – in a way that constitutes a simple, impermeable discourse of the Imaginary. Spade explains that, 'I can show Brian our District Attorney that if he goes around trying to collect everybody, he's going to have a tangled case. But if he sticks to Wilmer here, he can get a conviction standing on his head'. The DA would prefer a neat, imaginary discourse with nothing that does not fit (provided it is not examined too closely). The fall guy, like the Wonderley story and the Falcon itself, can be considered a form of necessary fiction. More than a lie, it is a construction that benefits the Other (as much as the teller), granting it consistency, wholeness, meaningfulness. Just as the fiction of the imaginary number benefited Descartes, Leibniz and those mathematicians who came after them, the fall guy story benefits Spade and his co-conspirators, and allows the DA – *qua* big Other, figure of the Law – to maintain an appearance of justice having been done. Equally, like the phallic signification that allows the Symbolic order to function, such an imaginary discourse is

[93] Gottfried Leibniz, *Mathematische Schriften*, quoted in Plotnitsky, *The Knowable*, p. 145.

produced by the "value" of the Falcon statue, itself the fiction necessary to the functioning of the film's narrative.

This is, once again, *The Maltese Falcon* at its most Lacanian. The concept of fiction is crucial to psychoanalysis in several respects, the most significant of which perhaps being Lacan's famous aphorism that, 'every truth has the structure of a fiction.'[94] Lacan explains that "fiction" or "fictitious" does not, for him, have simply the meaning of deceptive or illusory that is suggested by the French "*fictif*"; instead the "truth" of this fiction is hinted at in what he feels to be an overlooked aspect of the work of Jeremy Bentham: his *Theory of Fictions*.[95] Lacan draws a contrast between Bentham's investigations of 'the dialectic of the relationship of language to the real' and the 'opposition between fiction and reality' in the Freudian experience, in that Bentham situates pleasure on the side of the real whereas Freud situates it on the side of fiction.[96] However, Lacan is explicit in his own understanding of the term "fiction" when he claims that, '[t]he fictitious is not, in effect, in its essence that which deceives, but is precisely what I call the symbolic.'[97] He reiterates this position later in the same year, observing that, '*The Theory of Fictions* shows [that Bentham] is the man who approaches the question at the level of the signifier,' which is to say at the level of the Symbolic.[98]

This would appear to present a considerable problem for the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic already established in this project, which would suggest that "fiction" should more logically be situated on the side of the former. More problematically, Žižek goes one step further in this contrary formulation of the

[94] Lacan, *S7*, p. 12.
[95] See ibid., p. 12, and also *S16*, p. 190. Interestingly, Lacan suggests that it was Roman Jakobson that first pointed him in the direction of Bentham.
[96] Lacan, *S7*, p. 12. In this instance, Lacan's use of the term "real" should be read in line with Bentham's as referring to "reality" rather than the Real.
[97] Ibid., p. 12.
[98] Ibid., p. 228.

rapport between Lacan and Bentham, positing that Bentham '*produced avant la lettre the Lacanian distinction between the Symbolic and the Imaginary*: fictitious entities make up the realm of the Symbolic, whereas "unicorns," etc. are imaginary fabrications.'[99] And it is by no means some sort of aberration on Lacan's part, isolated to a couple of utterances in the course of one Seminar out of nearly thirty; he returns to the subject a decade later to insist once more that, 'the *Theory of Fictions* is (…) the putting into question of that which is involved in all human institutions.'[100] This should again be understood as the realm of the Symbolic order, particularly in light of what Lacan then adds:

> Nothing could be done, to take things from the sociological angle, that better isolates that which is involved in this category of the symbolic, which is found to be precisely the one reactualised, but in a whole different manner, the Freudian event and what ensued. [101]

But it is also in this Seminar that a way out of the deadlock is perhaps suggested. Firstly, Lacan always seems to discuss Bentham in terms of utilitarianism and what he refers to, in *D'un Autre à l'autre*, as 'the revision of the problem of ethics' in psychoanalysis.[102] He cites the "human institutions" and the social function in this discourse in relation to Bentham, and so it perhaps makes sense, in this context, to discuss fictions in terms of the Symbolic order.[103] However, Lacan identifies *the Real* as 'the pivotal point of that which is involved in the ethics of psychoanalysis,' and subsequently adds that, 'I suppose, of course, that this Real is subject to the very severe interposition (…) of the joint operation of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.'[104] The key point here is this "joint operation" of Symbolic and Imaginary, where the site of

[99] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 87, original emphasis.
[100] Lacan, *S16*, p. 190.
[101] Ibid., p. 190.
[102] Ibid., p. 190.
[103] Indeed, Charles Ogden – Bentham's editor and commentator on the *Theory of Fictions* – suggests that Bentham's theory, 'was elaborated to cope with the symbolic factor in all its ramifications, legal, scientific, and metaphysical' (Jeremy Bentham, *Theory of Fictions*, ed. by CK Ogden (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1932), p. xxvii). Although Ogden of course uses "symbolic" in the more general sense, to refer to abstract language.
[104] Lacan, *S16*, p. 189.

*meaning* has already been located. Lacan also comments that it was no coincidence that it was Charles Ogden – as someone who interrogated language in terms of what Lacan expressed as 'the *meaning of meaning*, focusing on the question of what is meaning, that things have a signification' – that edited Bentham's work on fiction.[105] Therefore, returning to Bentham and teasing out the correlations with Lacanian theory while also keeping in mind the functioning of fiction in *The Maltese Falcon* helps to work through this apparent contradiction and apprehend an imaginary dimension to the concept.

The naissance of Bentham's theory of fictions is well-known: in his jurisprudence, Bentham encountered certain "false propositions" or abstract legal terms that had no basis in reality and/or whose original significance had been lost and were therefore – like the Lacanian "*fictif*" – deceptive or illusory. Bentham sought to eradicate these "legal fictions" from the legal discourse but found that it could not do entirely without terms such as "property" or "right", even where there were no corresponding real entities. It is from here that the Theory of Fictions emerged, and already a very Lacanian note is sounded when, in an analysis of the development of this Theory of Fictions, LJ Hulme observes on Bentham's part, 'a limited rehabilitation for fictions as "fictitious entities" which had their origin in the requirements of discourse and the inescapable limitations of language.'[106] So for Bentham, it seems, fictions have their origin in the "limitations of language", in the same way that – as has already been seen, and will be further explored below – so much proceeds from Lacan's own articulation of this limitation, the barred Other ($\not{A}$). More specifically (and as already suggested above), Bentham divided such abstract language into two categories: the names of fictitious entities and fabulous entities, the former being 'an entity to which, though by the grammatical form of the discourse employed in speaking of it, existence

[105] Ibid., p. 189.
[106] LJ Hume, 'The Political Functions of Bentham's Theory of Fictions', in *Jeremy Bentham: Life, Influence and Perspectives on His Thought*, vol. 1, ed. by, Bhikhu C Parekh (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 522-533 (p. 524).

be ascribed, yet in truth and reality existence is not meant to be ascribed' and the latter, 'the name employed for the designation of the other class of unreal entities,' which is to say "imaginary nonentities" such as ghosts.[107] The crucial point for Bentham was that fictions were things that were spoken of in the same way as real objects but did not become reified or, as he puts it, 'to which existence is seriously meant to be ascribed (...) but without any such danger as that of producing any such persuasion as that of their possessing (...) any real existence.'[108] In short then, fictions are spoken as though they were real, while fabulous entities are not.[109]

In fact, Lacanian and Benthamite theory are at certain points here working in very similar territory. Bentham insisted that fictions are a function of discourse when he declared, '[t]o language, then – to language alone – it is, that fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible, yet indispensable existence.'[110] They are then, discursive constructs, as Michael Twining observes: 'Bentham's theory of fictions is a constructivist epistemology based on utility: we construct our knowledge of the world through the lens of language, itself a human construct.'[111] This once again places fictions on the side of the Lacanian Symbolic – where signifiers interpose to constitute structure – and the realm of discursivity already explored in previous chapters. Apropos of this, Wolfgang Iser observes a short circuit between language and fiction in the Benthamite account when he notes that, '[a]lthough fiction depends on language for its existence, it also constitutes discourse to such a degree that the only reality one can talk about is that of discourse-related real entities.'[112] As a result, he adds, '[b]ut if an

[107] Bentham, *Theory*, pp. 12 & 17.
[108] Ibid., p. 16.
[109] Miran Bozovic makes an interesting observation regarding Bentham's own idiosyncratic fear of ghosts, suggesting that this fear is 'precisely *because of the fact that they do not exist*' (*An Utterly Dark Spot: Gaze and Body in Early Modern Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 117). It is their suggestion of radical alterity that is the source of their threat; if we knew that they *did* exist, this threat would be diminished.
[110] Bentham, *Theory*, p. 15.
[111] Michael Twining, *Globalisation and Legal Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 96-97.
[112] Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 120.

independent reality is enveloped by discourse, then the assumed presence of physical objects is on the way to becoming a type of discourse itself, which comes close to liquidating its factual independence.'[113] This might suggest a descent into a pure, postmodern dissolution into "discursive reality", but this is to overlook the ever-important, inescapable function of the Real, from which, as both Bentham and Lacan have suggested, such things as fictions – in their "impossible existence" – proceed.

In the "indispensible existence" of fictions, Bentham's theory points to a further psychoanalytic contact: the notion of necessity. In fact, Bentham stated quite explicitly that, '[f]iction, in the simplest (...) case in which language can be employed, becomes a necessary resource.'[114] For him discourse cannot function without fiction. Bentham insisted that the result of fiction 'is the work of invincible necessity; on no other terms can discourse be carried on.'[115] The function of necessity has already been explored, at length, in Chapter 3. It will be pursued further, in this Lacano-Benthamite configuration, below. This is, however, not wholly to conflate the Lacanian and Benthamite accounts of language. Indeed, Marc De Kesel suggests that, 'Bentham's interpretation of language differs profoundly from Lacan's, if only because of Bentham's idea that language should be seen as an instrument (i.e., as a *sign*) and not as a *signifier*.'[116] He quotes Bentham, who insisted that, '[l]anguage is the sign of thought, an instrument for the communication of thought from one mind to another (...) of the thought which is in the mind of him by whom the discourse is uttered.'[117] Whereas for Lacan, such communication is itself a fiction: '[i]n your most ordinary conversations language has a purely fictional character, you give the other the feeling that you are

[113] Ibid., p. 120.
[114] Bentham, *Theory*, p. 73.
[115] Ibid., p. 59.
[116] Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 60.
[117] Bentham, *Theory*, p. 70.

always there, that is to say, that you are capable of producing the expected response.'[118] It is on the basis of this common fiction that any sense of "communication" or "understanding" between two subjects can be achieved.

Perhaps the most striking point of correlation has already been suggested by Bentham's description of the relation between fictions and reality. In one of the many statements intended to define a fiction, he declared, '[b]y a fictitious entity, understand an object, the existence of which is feigned by the imagination – feigned for the purpose of discourse – and which, when so formed, is spoken of as a real one.'[119] The crucial phrase here is the final one: "spoken of as a real one". Ogden clarifies this further when he states, quoting Bentham, that '[t]o be spoken of at all *every* fictitious entity *must* be spoken of *as if* it were real.'[120] The Theory of Fictions thus operates within the realm of the "as if" that, in the Lacanian context, has already been explored thoroughly in Chapter 3. Ogden also points to a parallel development in the theory of fictions in the form of Hans Vaihinger's *Philosophie des Als Ob* (*Philosophy of the As If*), an important text in the development of Fictionalism. In this book, Vaihinger states that, 'The principle of Fictionalism is as follows: An idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance.'[121] This "as if" mode is both very close to Bentham's own formulations – although Ogden is clear that Vaihinger's philosophy emerged independently of Bentham's – and part of a much longer trajectory of thought.[122] Indeed, Kiarina Kordela suggests that it extends at least from Pascal to Althusser and

[118] Lacan, *S3*, p. 115.
[119] Bentham, *Theory*, p. 114.
[120] Bentham, *Works*, vol. VIII, p. 19, quoted in Ogden, *Theory*, p. lx, original emphasis.
[121] Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. by CK Ogden, 2nd edn (London: Routledge & Kegen Paul, 1935), p. viii.
[122] See Ogden, *Theory*, p. xxxii.

Octave Mannoni.[123] Both Pascal's Wager, which of course suggested acting "as if" you believe, and Mannoni's famous "*je sais bien, mais quand même...*", the perverse "as if" of fetishism are indeed very close to Bentham's treatment of fictions. And interestingly, Žižek identifies a retroactive temporality in such an "as if": reading, via Althusser, what Žižek describes as Pascal's 'Act as if you believe, pray, kneel down, and belief will come by itself,' he points to 'an intricate reflective mechanism of retroactive "autopoietic" causality, of how "external" ritual performatively generates its own (…) foundation.'[124] Concomitant to this "as if" temporality is then the future anterior of an act that *will have been* in devotion once faith has arrived.

Furthermore, there is in general something of a rapport between the reception of Bentham's work and the project of structuralism that first compelled Lacan. Ogden insists that the Theory of Fictions 'must be developed as the nucleus of a complete theory of symbolism in every branch of human thought.'[125] This resonates with Saussure's own insistence that semiology should be a science of the entire domain of human experience, of which linguistics would be but a sub-discipline.[126] And in a thought provoking paper on Bentham and musicology, Cynthia M Grund argues that the Theory of Fictions should 'arouse the interest of those philosophers and semioticians who are interested in questions of [in this case, but also more generally] musical semiotics and/or ontology.'[127] In a manner that will indeed be taken forward in this project, she adds that 'fictionalism may contribute to theoretical examination of several problems of ontology, epistemology and signification which are raised by aesthetic

[123] A Kiarina Kordela, *$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 169n39. Although Kordela does – mistakenly according to Ogden – insist upon the influence of Bentham upon Vaihinger.
[124] Žižek, 'Class Struggle', p. 118.
[125] Ogden, *Theory*, p. cxlix.
[126] Saussure, *Course*, p. 68. However, the effect of Structural linguistics had been, conversely, the extension of linguistic method to the wider field.
[127] Cynthia M Grund, 'Jeremy Bentham's Theory of Fictions: Some Reflections on its Implications for Musical Semiosis and Ontology' in *Musical Semiotics in Growth*, ed. by Eero Tarasti (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), pp. 57-72 (p. 58).

objects.'[128] In the first instance here, it is the function of fiction in *film* that suggests a reconsideration of the Lacano-Benthamite intersection.

In light of *The Maltese Falcon* then, it seems necessary to read Lacan *avec Bentham* in order to apprehend an *imaginary* dimension to fiction, in line with Lacan's insistence upon the "joint operation" of the Symbolic and Imaginary. The fiction offered by Spade – that of Wilmer as fall guy – is, as Spade himself makes clear, a discursive construction that gives the appearance of a consistent and meaningful whole.[129] This is in fact the necessary role of everyday language as such: the point at which the Imaginary and the Symbolic come together to produce meaning, which, as it was identified in Chapter 3, is *the consistency of discourse*. Without the fiction of meaning – the fiction of what Bentham described as the transmission of thought from one mind to another via discourse – the world begins to lose its consistency. As Žižek observes, 'Bentham was sharp enough to steer clear of the delusion that we can dispense with this fetishistic split ("I know that fictions are unreal, but I nonetheless speak of them as if they are real objects").'[130] Without fictions to support it, the world would disintegrate, becoming an inconsistent and meaningless chaos. And as Roberto Harari notes, the function of fiction is indispensible: 'we must not "overcome" fiction in order to go on to the truth. On the contrary, insofar as truth is said – and saying it all does not entirely exist – there is no alternative but to endure it as fictional.'[131] Lacan, like Bentham, does not seek to do away with such fictions; they are a necessary condition. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he suggests that he is accused of claiming little more than "The king is naked". He explains that,

> If I do say "The king is naked", it is not in the same way as the child who is supposed to have exposed the universal illusion, but more in the manner of Alphonse Allais,

[128] Ibid., p. 58.
[129] It is interesting, given the birth of the Theory of Fictions in jurisprudence, that the exercise of such a fiction in *The Maltese Falcon* is again in the service of the Law in the DA's straightforward conviction.
[130] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 87.
[131] Harari, *Four Fundamental*, p. 184.

> who gathered a crowd around him by announcing in a sonorous voice, "How shocking! Look at that woman! Beneath her dress she's stark naked!" Yet in truth I don't even say that. If the king is, in fact, naked, it is only insofar as he is so beneath a certain number of clothes – no doubt fictitious but nevertheless essential to his nudity.[132]

For Lacan it is enough to understand that fiction *clothes* everything and that underneath such fictions everybody is indeed naked, but nonetheless such fictions must be retained.[133] For, as Žižek states, 'as soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself, *the moment we subtract fictions from reality, reality itself loses its discursive-logical consistency*.'[134]

Apropos of this unavoidable necessity, Žižek conjures a striking image when he states that, '[w]ithout the sheet of paper which patches up its gaps (as in Dick's *Time Out of Joint*), reality itself falls apart.'[135] Fiction *qua* "sheet of paper" which "covers over the gaps" is perhaps the strongest possible indicator of the imaginary dimension to the Lacano-Benthamite Theory of Fictions. It is the "paper" itself that lends the world a consistent, meaningful quality. Philip Dravers furthers this formulation in his work on Lacan and Poe when he offers the following aphoristic conclusion: 'Fiction is the envelope of being.'[136] (To move from Žižek's metaphor to Dravers', recall that Dupin realises that it is enough to fold a sheet of paper – in that case the *letter* – back on itself to form an *envelope*.) Fiction, then, as an envelope – a piece of paper *that folds around being* – is a necessary condition of meaningfulness and consistency. Renata Salecl diagnoses the malady of postmodern society as a disbelief in this fiction of the big Other – the Symbolic order as such, as it relates to the subject – and a desire to encounter what is "behind" the fiction.[137] Such an encounter is traumatic, and it is only the wall of fiction that saves the subject from such trauma; as an everyday example, Salecl

[132] Lacan, *S7*, pp. 13-14.
[133] Bentham also echoed this sartorial metaphor when he suggested that fictions are "dressed up in the garb" of real entities (see *Theory*, p. 16).
[134] Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 87.
[135] Ibid., p. 85.
[136] Philip Dravers, 'To Poe, Logically Speaking', in *Topologically Speaking*, pp. 205-248 (p. 234).
[137] See Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 151.

highlights the rules of politeness in speech that dictate one says, "Hi, how are you?" even if one means, "Drop dead, I hate you" and the abandonment of such polite words is not a liberation but a violent disruption.[138] As Cecilia Sjöholm observes, 'a belief in the fiction needs to be sustained for social bonds to exist, whether we talk about Santa Claus, simple polite phrases, or other social codes.'[139] For the Symbolic to function there must be an imaginary additive, a fiction to guarantee its discourse. And so *pace* Lacan – and even *contra* Žižek (but also, given his description of fictions, *pro* Žižek in the same breath) – it could be suggested that while fictions are certainly implicated in the Symbolic (they are comprised of signifiers), bringing Lacan, Bentham and *The Maltese Falcon* together insists upon an imaginary dimension therewith.[140] To complete the construction, if fictions are "made of signifiers" they bring about a "signified effect": a cohesive, meaningful discourse produced in the Imaginary. Fiction then as the envelope of being, the paper over the cracks, constitutes the imaginary veneer over the symbolic structure.[141]

In one final note before turning to the question of fiction and film noir itself, it is worth acknowledging Lacan's subsequent turn to Bentham in the early 1970s Seminars as it relates to what has previously been said of *The Maltese Falcon* and the imaginary number. At this point, Lacan speaks of "verbal fictions" and repeats his declaration that, "there is no metalanguage". This, he explains, is because there can be no point 'whereby language itself becomes "meta";' this division is not tenable because – as discussed in

[138] Ibid., p. 151.
[139] Cecilia Sjöholm, *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), p. 187n46.
[140] In this light, Žižek's use of "imaginary" to refer to fabulous entities, as opposed to symbolic fictions, would seem almost to be non-Lacanian: the imagination rather than the realm of meaning.
[141] It is tempting to posit a further metaphor concerning the relationship RSI, which recalls Lacan's use of the Heideggerian vase: the Real is then – amongst other things – the void around which the vase is formed, the Symbolic could be understood as a wire frame – a network of interconnected points – that shapes the vase, and the Imaginary as something like a papier-mâché coating that covers the frame – "papering over the gaps" – to form a surface.

Chapter 3 – there can be no Archimedean point "outside" it.[142] Therefore, Lacan concludes that, in the case of metalanguage, 'it is necessary to develop it as a fiction.'[143] This condition of immanence within the Symbolic means that any such "meta" point must be forged *within* language as a 'fiction on the basis of the word.'[144] Furthermore, remembering that "there is no metalanguage" is but another way of expressing the lack in the Other (Ⱥ), this returns fiction to its source in failure, dissonance or impossibility in language. This point, at which Lacan's and Bentham's fictions converge, in turn aligns the concept with what has already been said regarding √-1 and phallic signification: it is another form of response to lack, a construction that – like the imaginary number – *makes things work*. Metalanguage and phallic signification are of course two distinct concepts (although the phallus, or phallic function, could be considered – as Chapter 3 has already explained – a fictional meta-point for the Symbolic; indeed, Dravers calls fiction 'a function of the phallus).'[145] They are perhaps then two parallel strands in Lacanian theory, the same or similar responses to a common fault or fissure. This suggests that phallic signification *functions as a fiction*, and more specifically returns to √-1 the status of fiction that it was originally granted by the philosophers of mathematics.[146] *The Maltese Falcon* should then be considered a fiction in every sense: the statue's enamel coating an imaginary veneer that conceals the fake beneath, and its vicissitudes and deceits providing a number of constructions for the smooth running of the Law. It is fictitious throughout.

Can the same perhaps be said of the film itself – in the cinematic framework – of its role in film noir, of the question of film noir in general? In this context, it is Lacan's

[142] Lacan, *S19* (08/12/1971).
[143] Ibid..
[144] Lacan, *S20*, p. 107.
[145] Dravers, 'Poe', p. 234.
[146] In fact, Harty Field argues for a general mathematical fictionalism, suggesting that numbers are merely a convenience, a useful fiction for doing science (see *Science without Numbers: A Defence of Nominalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)).

use of "fiction" in relation to Freud and the theory of the drives that points the way forward for a critical exploration of the construction of noir. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Lacan notes that Freud called the drive 'a *Grundbegriff,* a fundamental concept' for psychoanalysis.[147] And yet the concept's epistemological status is utterly uncertain: like Freud's other crucial gambit – the unconscious – the drive is not subject to direct empirical observation but rather must be ascertained, inferred or deduced from its effects on reality – which is to say on the subject – in the form of the dream and the symptom. Lacan adds that Freud, being a "good epistemologist", knew that on its introduction to science, the concept of the drive 'would be preserved if it functioned, as one would now say—I would say if it traced its way in the real that it set out to penetrate.'[148] The drive, as a concept first emerging in a nascent form in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, through to its first, full expression in the *Three Essays*, its formulation in the *Papers on Metapsychology*, and its utter reformulation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (and then onto to Lacan who subsequently identifies it as one of the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) has self-evidently been preserved and functioned for psychoanalytic theory. Lacan notes that '[s]omewhere else, [Freud] says that the drive belongs to our myths' but adds that he (Lacan) ignores the term myth (for all its Lévi-Straussian connotations, perhaps) and instead prefers Freud's other given term: 'the word *Konvention,* convention, which is much closer to what we are talking about and to which I would apply the Benthamite term, fiction.'[149] A 'fundamental

[147] Lacan, *S11*, p. 162.
[148] Ibid., p. 163.
[149] Lacan, *S11*, p. 163. To be exact, this "somewhere else" is the *New Introductory Lectures*, where Freud states that, '[t]he theory of the instincts is, as it were, our mythology. The instincts are mythical beings, superb in their indefiniteness' (SE XXII, p. 131).

concept' or '*fundamental fiction*,' the drive – in relation to metapsychology – is yet another *algorithme qui sert*, which is of use.[150]

In fact, Freud himself recognised the value of fiction when constructing his metapsychology. In the theoretical section of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he discussed the concept of repression in terms of what he described as 'psychological scaffolding' and plainly states that he had, 'already explored the fiction of a primitive psychical apparatus.'[151] Furthermore, Laplanche and Pontalis, in their discussion of metapsychology in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, also describe the 'conceptual models' of the theory of psychoanalysis in terms of, for example, 'the fiction of a psychical apparatus divided up into agencies.'[152] Freud's metapsychology thus constituted a set of models, tools, devices employed in order to understand better the functioning of the human psyche. And moreover, in another example of the intersection of psychoanalysis with the Theory of Fictions, both Bentham and Ogden align the language of psychological investigation with the discourse of fictions: the former stated that, '[f]aculties, powers of the mind, dispositions: all these are unreal; all these are but so many fictitious entities,' and the latter noting that, '[Bentham's] chief contention, that every sort of psychological description is fictional (...) relegated the "faculties", which dominated both the associationist and nineteenth century schools, to the position of mere heuristic conveniences.'[153] Bentham, like Freud, realised that a specialised, abstract language must be employed in the discourse on psychology.

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[150] Lacan, *S11*, p. 163. Adrian Johnston explicitly connects the square root of minus one to metapsychological principles. See 'Review', http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=720. Accessed 12 December 2010.

[151] Freud, SE V, p 598.

[152] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1988), p. 359.

[153] Bentham, *Theory*, p. 10; Ogden, *Theory*, p. lxxx. Ogden also notes an element of psychic relativism that is entailed in the *Theory of Fictions* when he states that, '[f]or Bentham, as for anyone who accepts a Theory of Fictions founded on linguistic psychology rather than on logical assumptions, the term 'real' can have no use other than as a pointer indicating varying degrees of symbolic approximation to a technological ideal' (Ogden, *Theory*, p. lxi).

It is at this point that a new approach to the understanding of noir can be suggested. Epistemologically speaking, the most interesting – and most difficult – point in Freud's work is his most speculative: the twists and the turns, false steps and revisions of his late work, such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Analysis, Terminable and Interminable*. It is here that Freud most clearly recognised the necessity of such fictions in order to proceed, in order to further the theoretical understanding and thus practical development of psychoanalysis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he framed his work as "speculation", 'an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead.'[154] And it in fact leads to one of the most startling and compelling pieces of the Freudian oeuvre, producing the concept of the death drive, which came to characterise – via Lacan's eleventh Seminar – the very character of the drive as such. In *Analysis, Terminable and Interminable*, Freud was even more emphatic: when faced with the (ultimately unanswerable) question regarding the "taming" of the drives, he had no choice but to appeal to 'the Witch Meta-psychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – I had almost said "phantasying" – we shall not get another step forward.'[155] Freud's abiding principle in his theoretical endeavours was then the one set out in the *Papers on Metapsychology*: '[a] gain in meaning is a perfectly justifiable ground for going beyond the limits of direct experience.'[156] The metapsychology provided Freud with heuristic principles: a set of useful, even necessary fictions that took his understanding further, deeper and into new territory.

Is the concept of "film noir" not just such a fiction, a (critical) construction brought about in order to take further the understanding of "a certain type of crime film"? Wolfgang Iser notes that, 'fiction becomes a contrivance enabling discourse to

[154] Freud, SE XVIII, p. 24.
[155] Freud, *Analysis, Terminable and Interminable*, SE XXIII, pp. 209-254 (p. 225).
[156] Freud, 'The Unconscious', SE XIV, pp. 159-216 (p. 168).

open up realities.'[157] As explored in Chapter 1, the intervention of a signifier (in the form of the fiction, "noir") enabled an entire critical discourse. Film noir as a category is crucial to the functioning of film criticism and film making (as will be seen in the next section) and yet, in a very real sense, *it did not exist*. Despite the claims of a critic such as Sheri Beisen for a consistent, American discourse on "noir" contemporaneous to the films themselves (see Chapter 2, where this claim is found to be lacking), "film noir" did not exist – literally – as a signifier in the Anglo-American tradition until thirty years after it was said to have appeared as a phenomenon.[158] And the deconstructive, revisionist works of critics such as Vernet and Elsaesser have shown any common understanding of the concept to be fraught with difficulty. In this way, beyond existing simply ex post facto, film noir could be considered to exist *in absentiā factī*: it "does not exist" and yet has a very palpable effect on the reality of the cinema. In fact, this is Miran Bozovic's very definition of a "fiction", as an entity that has an effect on reality 'despite its inexistence.'[159] Mark Bould further compounds this sense of fictitious noir suggesting that, 'when we approach film noir, we are faced with neither an objectively-existing object out there in the world nor some ideal to which particular films more or less conform.'[160] He adds, in harmony with Naremore and indeed with the conclusions of Chapter 1 of this project, that 'film noir is an intersubjective discursive phenomenon: a fabrication.'[161] However, quoting Dudley Andrew's *Mists of Regret*, Bould concludes that '[a] fabrication ... is by no means a fiction.'[162] Of course, fiction here is meant in a pejorative, non-Benthamite manner, as somehow valueless. Andrew's remark is made

[157] Iser, *Fictive*, pp. 119-120.
[158] For example, Steve Neale states that, '[a]s a single phenomenon, *noir*, in my view, never existed' (*Genre*, p. 173).
[159] Bozovic, *Utterly Dark Spot*, p. 95. Bozovic further suggests that a fabulous entity is one that has an effect *because of its inexistence* (see the comment on ghosts, above). This could suggest a convergence with the open ontology of noir set out in Chapter 2, which makes a virtue of film noir's inexistence; however, the suggestion of noir as a fabulous entity is incompatible with the formulations of this project and as such will not be explored.
[160] Bould, *Film Noir*, p. 2.
[161] Ibid., p. 2.
[162] Ibid., p. 2, quoting, Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), p. 12.

apropos of the original French film noir, Poetic Realism, and further exploration of his commentary shows that he himself is in fact functioning within the fictitious discourse: like the American noir, Poetic Realism was – Andrew suggests – 'in effect a fabrication of the critical establishment, and it remains so today.'[163] It was, however, an incredibly useful fabrication that provided a label, 'to help sort out the increasing number of films that displayed at least a common ambition.'[164] This fabrication is therefore indeed a (Benthamite) fiction, one that opens out critical possibilities and deepens understanding.

Noir must therefore be retained, like Freud's metapsychology, as an heuristic device – *un algorithme qui sert* – that enables both the practice of film criticism and, in turn, the practice of film making and one which has established for the concept a prominent place within the cultural imagination. This returns the formulation of noir set forth in this project to one of its starting points, in the work of James Naremore, who – having established noir as a discursive construct – concludes in his introduction that, noir 'nevertheless has heuristic value, mobilizing specific themes that are worth further consideration.'[165] Here Naremore almost echoes Freud's own desire to pursue "speculative phantasying" in order to take another step forward, to take up the fiction – with full knowledge of its fictitious state – and use it better to understand the realm of Film Studies. Noir is then, like Freud's *Konvention* of the drive, a *necessary fiction*, which is indeed subject to critique, deconstruction, even dissolution and yet must be retained.[166]

And moreover, Freud's "speculative phantasying" recalls a note in the *Panorama* on Borde and Chaumeton's analysis of *Gilda*. In his translator's note on the text, Borde and Chaumeton's description of Gilda's long evening gloves as "a pair of

[163] Andrew, *Mists*, p. 12.
[164] Ibid., p. 12.
[165] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 6.
[166] In this light, the "as if" process of definition outlined in Chapter 3 can now be understood as a fictitious construction.

black stockings" is explained by Paul Hammond as a '*délire d'interprétation*:' in psychiatry a "delusion of reference", the paranoid inference of specific meaning where there is none; or perhaps more loosely (but literally) a delirium of interpretation, or even an unreading (*dé-lire* after Barthes' *déjouer*) of the film.[167] Indeed, the fetishistic overtones of a stocking fantasy or even stocking frenzy (*délire*) are very much in keeping with the surrealist tendencies of Borde and Chaumeton and their peers, which are in fact signalled by Marcel Duhamel's recollection of the ecstasy of cinema-going in the age of noir.[168] As Naremore explains in a note on the *Panorama*, such serial viewing and what Louis Aragon described as a method of "synthetic criticism" aimed to emphasise the libidinal implications of shots or scenes, and served as 'springboard for (...) poetic imagination.'[169] And so the question begs, is Hammond's commentary necessarily any less true of the rest of the work? What Borde and Chaumeton produced in their analysis was perhaps a certain delirium or "fantasy of noir": finding meaning where there perhaps was none and thereby constructing the very fiction that enabled their endeavour and engendered their category.

However, this formulation leaves the classic films of the 1940s and 1950s in a rather nebulous position (particularly in relation to the original French criticism). Seen retrospectively as *noir without being noir* – which is to say, understood as "noir" in France and yet almost wholly innocent of this appellation in America – they figure as a sort of void, even a proton-pseudos at the very heart of critical discourse. This term "noir" could be understood as a "primordial lie": like the Falcon statue, although this time a cinematic rather than filmic MacGuffin that set the wheels of discourse in motion. In this way, just as Althusser claimed that he published works in order to conceal the fact that he did not exist, so too could the seemingly endless stream of

[167] Borde & Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 81n1. And see Barthes, *Le Neutre* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2002).
[168] See Duhamel, *Panorama*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.
[169] See Naremore, *Panorama*, p. xi.

works on noir (of which this project is of course a part) be understood as an attempt to conceal this proton-pseudos, this first lie of film criticism, so crucial is it to the coherence of Film Studies as a discipline.[170] In fact, Bentham suggested that when fictions are thus regarded as realities, 'many an empty name is considered as the representative of a correspondent reality' and the following, final section will explore the way in such an empty name – or perhaps an "empty signifier" – as "noir" came to be regarded as a reality in Hollywood through the critical generification of the concept of noir and the concomitant emergence of neo-noir as a filmmaking practice.[171]

[170] See Bozovic's discussion of *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, in *Utterly Dark Spot*, p. 119.
[171] Bentham, *Works*, Vol. III, p. 286, quoted in Ogden, *Theory*, p. xxvii.

## 4. Neo-Noir, Genre and the Master Signifier

Any understanding of the classic noir, of the very *idea* of noir itself is intimately bound up with both the films and filmmakers of the period associated with the appearance of "neo-noir" in Hollywood. As the overview of critical literature on noir in Chapter 1 has shown, the Anglo-American idea of noir emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the same moment in which films such as *Point Blank* (1967), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) signalled a renewed interest in Hollywood in the filmic possibilities of noir.[172] A term attributed to Todd Erickson, neo-noir – as the name suggests – constitutes a renewal of noir that is aware of the heritage of the past while at the same time moving with distinct motivations.[173] Erickson contends that,

> Contemporary film noir is a new genre of film. (...) The term for this new body of films should be "*neo-noir*", because these films still are *noir* films; yet a new type of *noir* film, one which effectively incorporates and projects the narrative and stylistic conventions of its progenitor onto a contemporary cinematic canvas.[174]

This confluence of both the filmic and the cinematic possibilities of noir, in particular in the 1970s, will form the necessary, final stage in the investigation of the idea of noir.

Broadly following Richard Martin's model in *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, the stages in the development of the post-noir movements can be organised by decade: from 1960s revival, to 1970s revisionism, 1980s pastiche, 1990s irony, and (to supplement Martin) 2000s hyper-stylisation or re-mediation.[175] Indeed, in each case is there an instance of the "return with difference" under the signifier of noir that was first identified in relation to substitution/repetition in Chapter 1: noir was resuscitated almost immediately following its "demise" in 1958, where the idea of noir once again

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[172] *Point Blank*. Dir. John Boorman. USA, MGM, 1967; *The Long Goodbye*. Dir. Robert Altman. USA, Lion's Gate Films, 1973; *Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1974; *Taxi Driver* . Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976.

[173] See James Ursini, 'Angst at Sixty Fields per Second', *FNR*, pp. 275-288 (p. 287n1), where Ursini cites Erickson's 1990 thesis, *Evidence of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* as the term's point of origin.

[174] Todd Erickson, 'Kill Me Again: Movement Becomes a Genre', *FNR*, pp. 307-329 (p. 321).

[175] Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1999).

flourished in France with the *Nouvelle Vague*. Instigated in large part by Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960), the critic-filmmakers of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group in particular valorised the tropes of classic film noirs, reworking them in films such as François Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960) and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967).[176] Parallel to this, in America noir subsisted on television during the 1960s in series such as *The Fugitive*, *Dragnet*, and *Lineup*. And by the end of the decade the hard-boiled crime story had returned to Hollywood with *Harper* (1966) and *Point Blank*.[177] It was not, however, until the 1970s – when the Franco-American cultural dialectic turned once again and the influence of the Nouvelle Vague began to be felt in Hollywood – that the idea of noir was (re)established in the USA. Anticipated first by Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), the Hollywood New Wave filmmakers – for example, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and Penn – incorporated the experimentation of Godard and Melville with a more critical regard for their own heritage (a history of Hollywood drawn largely from formal training at film school or in television) to produce films such as *The Long Goodbye* and *Taxi Driver* that once again rethought the possibilities of noir.[178] And here film noir almost begins to resemble Benjamin's Angel of History, with his face 'turned toward the past' and yet 'irresistibly [propelled] into the future to which his back is turned.'[179] Neo-noir is a case of Hollywood turning to its own past, in order both to repeat and transform what is found there, and thus to carry it forward. It is, as Martin notes, 'informed by a growing

[176] *À bout de souffle*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. France, SNC, 1960; *Tirez sur le pianiste*. Dir. François Truffaut. France, Les Films de la Pléiade, 1960; *Le Samouraï*. Dir. Jean-Pierre Melville. France, CICC, 1967.
[177] *Harper*. Dir. Jack Smight. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1966.
[178] *Bonnie and Clyde*. Dir. Arthur Penn. USA, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1967.
[179] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 253-264 (pp. 257-258).

awareness (in industrial, critical and academic circles at least) of the concept of "film noir".'[180]

By the 1980s this awareness had become increasingly comfortable, with the overarching tendency of the period being towards pastiche, in the Jamesonian sense, as 'a neutral practice of (...) mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse.'[181] Critical interest was sustained in the idea of noir at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s in academia, where the first book-length Anglophone studies of noir were published: Kaplan's *Women in Film Noir*, Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedic Reference* and Hirsch's *The Dark Side of the Screen*, while neo-noir films moved away from the analytical, revisionist approach to become more formulaic and uncritical in their approach to noir. Films such as *Body Heat* (1981) (a tacit remake of *Double Indemnity*), *Against All Odds* (1984) and *No Way Out* (1987) evoked the typologies of noir through repetition rather than revision.[182] Neo-noir in this period was then a return with (minimal) difference of the idea of noir, a *recreation* or *restaging* of the classic period in modern dress. Such films took the idea of noir into the mainstream, to the extent that, by the 1990s, neo-noir productions seemed to dominate Hollywood. Following in the wake of Quentin Tarantino's success with the neo-heist movie, *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and the knowingly titled, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), films such as *The Usual Suspects*, *Seven*, *Casino*, and *Heat* (all 1995) offered a bricolage of the various iterations that had preceded it; they are informed by every stage in the development of noir and refer to this history in a playful and allusive manner that leads Martin to

[180] Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 65.
[181] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17. Beyond such formulism, the 1980s also saw developments in the hybridisation noir, for example, with horror in *Angel Heart* (1987) and sci-fi in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Terminator* (1984).
[182] *Body Heat*. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. USA, The Ladd Company, 1981; *Against All Odds*. Dir. Taylor Hackford. USA, Columbia Pictures, 1984; *No Way Out*. Dir. Roger Donaldson. USA, Orion Pictures, 1987.

describe the mode as "Nineties Irony".[183] By the 2000s, this process had been refined to such an extent that "noir" films seemed to be working directly with the signifiers of "noirishness" rather than references to specific films. The hyper-stylised, graphical noir worlds of the Frank Miller films (*Sin City* (2005), *The Spirit* (2008)), for example, show film noir to be established in what Naremore describes as the 'mediascape' of cultural consciousness.[184] The idea of noir has become part of the shared text of popular culture. And moreover, the critical conception of noir functions in conjunction with the filmmaking process in a continuing, dialectical relationship. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002).[185] This film, which treads the ground between neo-noir and erotic thriller and whose opening scene Mark Bould suggests, presents an arresting image that could perhaps encapsulate the history of noir in a single shot. *Femme Fatale* begins with a scene from *Double Indemnity* – the final confrontation between Neff and Phyllis – played on television with French subtitles, the reflection in the screen showing a woman lying in bed watching the film.[186] Here is a picture of noir in microcosm: the Hollywood movie, overlaid with French text, a hint of eroticism combined with danger, brought to a contemporary audience through the medium of television. As Bould observes, 'this is how film noir was fabricated: in French and by the rearticulation of old films in new venues.'[187]

This development from the 1960s constitutes the process of generification of film noir in both critical and industrial terms. It is, moreover, a *dual* process of generification in that first – logically if not entirely chronologically, as this occurred

[183] Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 116. *Reservoir Dogs*. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA, Live Entertainment, 1991; *Pulp Fiction*. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA, Miramax Films, 1994; *The Usual Suspects*. Dir. Bryan Singer. USA/Germany, PolyGram, 1995; *Seven*. Dir. David Fincher. USA, New Line Cinema, 1995; *Casino*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. USA/France, Universal Pictures, 1995; *Heat*. Dir. Michael Mann. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1995.
[184] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 255. *Sin City*. Dir. Frank Miller/Robert Rodriguez/Quentin Tarantino. USA, Dimension Films, 2005; *The Spirit*. Dir. Frank Miller. USA, Lionsgate, 2008.
[185] *Femme Fatale*. Dir. Brian De Palma. France, Epsilon Motion Pictures, 2002.
[186] The theatrical trailer for the film begins with the sequence from *Double Indemnity*, and then proceeds to show the entire movie in fast-forward as if to suggest that it is but a footnote to the 1944 original noir.
[187] Bould, *Film Noir*, p. 102.

contemporaneously with the second – the entity known as "classic film noir" was established through a coincidence of both filmmaking and film criticism regarding the past. Secondly, through this production a second genre – "neo-noir" – emerged and was codified by the 1980s, when it was recognised 'as a distinct formal category.'[188] This first stage could not occur until the (French) idea of noir had worked its way back through Hollywood, and while Richard Martin argues that it has been the 'investigation and revival of film noir in the Hollywood cinema (...) that has most significantly contributed to the evolving concept of what film noir actually is,' the crucial role of the investigation of noir in the academic and critical contexts must not be overlooked.[189] It is the fact that these filmic and cinematic discourses worked together to shape the idea of noir that makes the neo-noir period so significant. As Steve Neale suggests, it is as a result of the 'growing ubiquity of the term' and the 'fashion for producing films which draw on its image' that '*film noir* now has a generic status it did not originally possess in the past.'[190] Indeed, it is this dialectic of the theory and practice of noir – where book-length studies such as Silver and Ward's *Encyclopedia*, Kaplan's collection on *Women in Film Noir* and Hirsch's first noir volume, *The Dark Side of the Screen* as well as films such as *Harper*, *Taxi Driver* and *Body Heat* all function together – that has established film noir as a genre.

Rick Altman argues that film genres begin as 'reading positions' established by critical dissection (by either studio personnel or film critics themselves), which are then expressed and reinforced through the act of filmmaking.[191] In fact, he argues that 'film production constantly involves a process of criticism that actually precedes the act of production' but this must itself be preceded by an act of production to critique, and so on, so that the relationship is indeed dialectical – as expressed above – rather than

[188] Hirsch, *Detours*, p. 18.
[189] Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 3.
[190] Neale, *Genre*, p. 3.
[191] See Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 44.

simply 'applied criticism' as Altman states.[192] The next step involves 'broad industry acceptance of the proposed reading position and genre' and as a result of this, expanded filmmaking practice and finally public awareness of this position, so that 'the process of viewing would always be filtered through the concept.' [193] Films are thus read in terms of a certain identifier (the name of the genre) and attendant generic expectations (characters, plot, visual style); the concept of the genre therefore determines the meaning attributed to films by the audience. This was, however, impossible during the period identified as "classic film noir" because such a reading position did not exist: it was not used in the industry or by contemporary Anglophone critics or viewers. Certain vague identifiers were posited at the time – as outlined in Chapter 2 – but none of them became established reading positions.

And so film noir was not a genre, nor could it become a genre, until its reappraisal in the 1960s and 1970s. These combined filmic and cinematic discourses had the effect of constituting this cycle of films in the past as a "genre" (*qua* reading position, and *pace* those identified in Chapter 1 who argue it is not a "genre" per se because it is identified by other traits) so that "film noir" stood as a retroactive, ordering principle through which films were read and their meaning determined. Having been established as a generic term in the 1970s, the signifier "noir" now had an effect on the past: as Steve Neale suggests, 'films like *Double Indemnity*, *Detour* (1945) and *Out of the Past* are now viewed generically as *noirs* in a way they never were when initially released.'[194] The past is here re-read in and by the present, given a new meaning through the concept of the genre, and a canon of "noir" comes into existence as remakes and retrospectives cement these films as "classics". This idea of noir also began to function in relation to filmmaking practice in a way that it could not have done during

[192] Ibid., p. 44.
[193] Ibid., pp. 46 & 53.
[194] Neale, *Genre*, p. 175. *Detour*. Dir. Edgar G Ulmer. USA, PRC, 1945.

the classic period; this "reading position" became a widespread industrial genre as the films of directors such as Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese engaged with the generic concept to produce a series of films that carried the idea forward and expressed it in new ways. This led to the development of neo-noir as a generic category, which came to such prominence through the 1980s that Dennis Hopper could describe noir in 1990 as, '[e]very director's favourite genre.'[195]

Rick Altman notes that this process can be understood as the transition of a critical term from adjective to noun; from a descriptive, such as "epic poetry" (for example, Homer or Virgil), to 'the standalone substantive *an epic*' (*War and Peace* or *Ben Hur* (1959)), the term becomes a categorical noun which can connect texts across different media, and thus functions as a signifier allowing the substitution-repetition process outlined above.[196] In this case it is from the descriptive "*roman noir*" and then "*film noir*" to the substantive "noir", from the deployment of a French descriptive term "*noir*" by critics such as Frank and Chartier (and the rightwing moralists before them) to characterise the tone or mood of a small number of films to its emergence as a categorical noun in both the work of Durgnat, Schrader, et al. *and* the material surrounding films such as *Body Heat* and *The Hot Spot* (1990) which refer to the concept or the cycle as a whole.[197] Altman recalls editing Thomas Schatz's dissertation in the 1970s, which used the term "noir" as a noun, stating that, '[o]blivious to the winds of change, I wanted him to use the full noun-plus-adjective expression.'[198] He adds that by 1981 the editors of *Hollywood Genres* were willing to accept this new, substantive usage, which showed that "noir" had indeed completed 'the full adjective-

[195] Quoted in Grist, 'Moving Targets', p. 267.
[196] Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 50 & 51. *Ben Hur*. Dir. William Wyler. USA, MGM, 1959.
[197] *The Hot Spot*. Dir. Dennis Hopper. USA, Orion Pictures, 1990. Todd Erickson suggests that the marketing material – produced by Hopper himself – was the first of its kind to describe a film as "noir" (see 'Kill Me', p. 326n1).
[198] Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 61.

to-noun trajectory.'[199] This is also reflected in the transition – although not in all works – from the italicised "*noir*", indicating a foreign word that is marked as different, almost misplaced in the text, to the standard "noir": the borrowed French word of the 1940s has by the 1970s and 1980s been absorbed into the Anglophone critical idiom like any other term. Noir has thus, in Naremore's words, 'fully entered the English language, and (...) formed a rich discursive category that the entertainment industry could expand and adapt in countless ways.'[200]

It is, moreover, in the contrast between these two points – the function of noir in 1946 and, say, 1972 – that a final distinction can be made between the *point de capiton* and the master signifier. Recalling the schema of the *point de capiton* as set out in the Elementary Cell of the Graph of Desire – as discussed in Chapter 1 – it should be noted that it is $S_2$, some second signifier arriving after the fact, which determines $S_1$ *qua* pre-existing chain of signifiers. How then does this relate to the master signifier? This structure must be understood in terms of Lacan's theory of the four discourses in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, where these mathemes are assigned very specific values. $S_1$ becomes the master signifier and $S_2$ "knowledge": '$S_1$ is, to say it briefly, the signifier, the signifier function, that the essence of the master relies upon. From a different angle you may perhaps recall what I emphasized several times last year – that the slave's own field is knowledge, $S_2$.'[201] Transcribing the schema into this context, the Graph can now be understood to reveal the dependency of the master signifier, $S_1$, on the network signifiers (knowledge), $S_2$, to give it significance. To understand this shift, it will be necessary to turn once more to Žižek's polyvalent use of the *point de capiton*/master signifier. A distinction between the two Lacanian terms has already been outlined in Chapter 3, but to this Žižek seems to bring another dimension: that of the

[199] Ibid., p. 61.
[200] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 37.
[201] Lacan, *S17*, p. 21. Alternately, they are designated as $S_1$, the big Other, and $S_2$, the battery of signifiers, which is instructive for the current discussion. See *S17*, p. 13.

"empty signifier".[202] Ernesto Laclau explains that the empty signifier is, of course, 'strictly speaking, a signifier without signified,' and adds that such a signifier can 'only emerge if there is a structural impossibility in signification as such.'[203] The empty, master signifier would thus appear to be of the same order as the phallus, as described above: a fictitious response to the lack in the Other. Indeed, like the Falcon, it stands for an impossible fullness of meaning sustained by a void. Žižek states that the master signifier is 'a kind of empty container, a designation that holds open the space for the thriving of the irreducible plurality.'[204] The master signifier must therefore be filled out with some positive content.[205] This is how the schema must now be reinterpreted: as Adrian Johnston explains, '[t]hese $S_2$s labor to elaborate a network of content (as "knowledge" [savoir]) on the basis of the (contingent) [designation] provided by $S_1$.'[206]

Now the difference between the function of the signifier "noir" in the 1940s and 1970s becomes clear: in 1946, "noir" of course functioned as a *point de capiton*, a retroactive ordering principle that determined the meaning of a group of films. In 1972 – the year of Schrader's 'Notes on Film Noir' – it does in fact *also* act in this retroactive fashion: having only recently entered the Anglophone tradition at this point, it functioned again as an ordering principle for Hollywood and its past. However, the signifier also functions during this period along the progressive vector of the Graph, as a master signifier. Richard Martin states that, 'noir was subjected to such rigorous

[202] Lacan does not appear to employ a term such as "*signifiant vide*" anywhere in his work, but it is no great leap to move from his insistence that the there can be no Other of the Other (and thus no Master) to the master signifier *qua* empty signifier: in both cases is the position *empty*.
[203] Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36 & 37. This should not be confused with the letter *qua* "signifier without signified" as discussed in Chapter 1; both anticipate their own retroactive determination, but the letter pertains to the Real, whereas the empty/master signifier pertains to the Symbolic and Imaginary.
[204] Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 203.
[205] Moreover, Žižek adds that 'the Master-Signifier is the privileged site at which fantasy intervenes, since the function of fantasy is precisely to fill in the void of the signifier-without-signified: that is to say, *fantasy is ultimately, at its most elementary, the stuff which fills in the void of the Master-Signifier* (*Parallax*, original emphasis, p. 373).
[206] Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2008), p. 250. Instead of "designation", Johnston uses "anchoring"; here there can, however, be no anchoring of the signifier. See Chapter 1.

academic and critical investigation that the concept of what exactly constituted film noir became diffuse and fragmented.'[207] It was therefore *emptied out*, made to mean almost anything. As a codified, generified signifier, noir (and its extension as neo-noir) stood – for industry, critics and audiences alike – as an empty receptacle for the *idea* of noir (*qua* network of signifiers, $S_2$). Naremore expresses this possibility when he insists that, '[t]he idea of noir, after all, can accommodate many different things.'[208]

This can be seen at the beginning of Martin's study of neo-noir when he poses a question from Derrida: 'What are we doing when, to practice a "genre," we quote a genre, represent it, stage it, expose its *generic law*, analyze it practically? Are we still practicing the genre?'[209] Martin's eventual answer is "yes": 'Of course (...). It is just that the genre itself has changed.'[210] These changes have already been mapped out above, and each of these instances of "practicing the genre" can thus be understood in terms of the elaboration of $S_1$ by $S_2$. It did in fact only become a matter of "practicing the genre" in the 1970s and 1980s when noir was established as a generic concept and could thus function as a master signifier, standing over Hollywood filmmaking and determining its meaning but at the same time being determined by its content. While there is a sense in which Martin feels that there is more "worth" or interest in the critical approach of the 1970s as compared to the formulaic neo-noir, all of the various iterations of the idea of noir can be seen as part of an ongoing filmic discourse that elaborates – practices – the genre through the various logics of, for example, pastiche, remake, irony or revisionism.[211] Each version of neo-noir posits this idea as something slightly different, expressing the concept of noir – which is to say, filling out the master signifier with its positive content – in a reconfigured way. The manner in which neo-noir films seem to

[207] Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 2.
[208] Naremore, *MTN*, p. 267.
[209] Derrida, 'Living On: Borderlines', trans. by James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 62-142 (p. 72), quoted in Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 1.
[210] Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 63.
[211] See ibid., pp. 26-27, 91-92 & 111.

work directly with the "signifiers" of noir has already been noted: reduced to certain images or types, films such as the *D.O.A.* remake, *L.A. Confidential* (1997) or *Sin City* each express a distinct idea of noir.[212] These (retrospective) processes are but different modalities of the relationship between $S_1$ and $S_2$, different ways in which the network of "knowledge" about noir can be expressed.

This "production of knowledge" is related to what Lacan calls the 'university discourse.'[213] It is, in effect, the designation Lacan gives to the elaboration of $S_2$ ("putting knowledge into circulation") in the service of $S_1$ (master).[214] The university discourse works to preserve the master signifier and consolidate its hegemonic position; indeed, Žižek situates the space of hegemony itself in 'the tension between the empty Master-Signifier and the series of "ordinary" signifiers which struggle to fill in the Master-Signifier with a particular content.'[215] This is then the space of genre: noir as a generic term – a master signifier, $S_1$ – guarantees the meaning, the readability of the films that come under its rubric, but only because these films – $S_2$ – work to determine precisely what that meaning is. As Žižek explains, 'the university discourse which then elaborates the network of Knowledge which sustains this readability by definition presupposes and relies on the initial gesture of the Master.'[216] The master signifier "noir" intervenes as an ordering principle that in itself adds no new content, only a sense of order: a reading position, or genre.

The university discourse performs the task of detailing this genre. Noir began in a very literal sense, although this is not what is meant by the Lacanian term, as a discourse of the university; as Foster Hirsch commented in 1981, '[*n*]*oir* is being rediscovered on college campuses and in revival theatres, as American *cinéastes* are

[212] *L.A. Confidential*. Dir. Curtis Hanson. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1997.
[213] Lacan, *S17*, p. 102.
[214] See ibid., pp. 104-105.
[215] Žižek, *Parallax*, p. 37.
[216] Ibid., p. 37.

finally catching up with the discovery of French critics over twenty five years ago.'[217] And this situation persists: Warner Brothers suggested that *L.A. Confidential* was not a commercial success because, '[t]he bulk of the audience who enjoys film noir are directors, film students, critics and the most ardent, generally upscale film enthusiast.'[218] These are indeed the agents of the idea of noir, and this all-encompassing effect of the discourse can be seen in a very real sense in the nexus of filmic and cinematic discourses that come together in the making of *Taxi Driver*. There are perhaps two no more influential figures in the shaping of the modern concept of noir than Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese. Both film school graduates and both with an obvious regard for classic film noir: Schrader is of course author of 'Notes on Film Noir' and director of a remake of the noir horror *Cat People* (1982), Scorsese worked a clip from *The Big Heat* (1953) into his first proper feature, *Mean Streets* (1973), and since then has sought the preservation and proliferation of noir through documentaries (*The Film Noir Story* and his own *A Century of Cinema*), producing neo-noir projects such as *The Grifters* (1990) and a *Night and the City* remake (1992), and sponsoring the restoration of *A Double Life* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948).[219] Like the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group before them, Schrader and Scorsese brought together film criticism and practical filmmaking in the service of the idea of noir.[220] *Taxi Driver* is therefore an almost overdetermined site of the elaboration of the master signifier noir that studiously observes its noir antecedents and offers a reconfiguration of the idea of noir to take

[217] Hirsch, *Dark Side*, p, 209.
[218] Quoted in Naremore, *MTN*, p. 276.
[219] See Martin, *Mean Streets*, p. 82. *Cat People*. Dir. Paul Schrader. USA, Universal Pictures, 1982; *The Big Heat*. Dir. Fritz Lang. USA, Columbia Pictures, 1953; *Mean Streets*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1973; *The Grifters*. Dir. Stephen Frears. USA, Cineplex-Odeon Films, 1990; *Night and the City*. Dir. Irwin Winkler. USA, Tribeca Films, 1992; *A Double Life*. Dir. George Cukor. USA, Garson Kanin Productions, 1947; *Force of Evil*. Dir. Abraham Polonsky. USA, Enterprise Productions, 1948.
[220] Schrader and Scorsese are not alone: Barry Gifford is another figure to straddle the filmic and cinematic discourses in an elaboration of noir. Gifford, who co-wrote David Lynch's neo-noir films *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *Lost Highway* (1997), is also the author of a book on noir called *The Devil Thumbs a Ride* (New York: Grove, 1988) (revised and expanded as *Out of the Past: Adventures in Film Noir* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2001)).

forward. It can be taken as a microcosm of the discursive practices of film noir criticism and production that help sustain the master signifier.

There is therefore a sort of short circuit between $S_1$ and $S_2$ because the chain of signifiers can unfurl under the aegis of the master signifier only because the master signifier is itself determined, retroactively defined *by* this very chain of signifiers. It is in this gap between $S_1$ and $S_2$, the concept and its content, that all the work of noir *qua* genre is carried out. "Noir" can be made to mean almost anything because, as Žižek suggests, '[w]hat the emptiness of the Master-Signifier conceals is thus the inconsistency of its content (its signified) (...); [it] obfuscates the inconsistent multitude of its possible meanings.'[221] This is why, like art or pornography, it is easier to recognise film noir than define it: it is understood through the various iterations of its network of knowledge. It is only through this elaboration that the order which is designated by the master signifier can be defined. This furthermore points once again to the double temporality of the progressive and retrospective vectors of the Graph of Desire, and the relationship between them. It is at the *point* – in the Hegelian sense of *Punkt* as the coincidence of space and time – that everything comes together: synchrony/diachrony, logical/chronological, retroactive/progressive, universal/particular, structure/content.[222] And here this project turns once again to Lacan's description of the *point de capiton* as 'the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively.'[223] The idea of noir ($S_1$) can only be understood in terms of a given, individual expression ($S_2$). Žižek expresses this as, 'a proper Lacanian paradox in which

[221] Žižek, *Plague*, p. 158.
[222] See Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature*, vol. 1, p. 229, §257; and Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (London: Routledge, 2005) on the double temporality involved in reading Hegel. Recall also that, in *S3*, Lacan introduces the *point de capiton* as a 'spatializing device' (p. 267).
[223] Lacan, *S3*, p. 268.

a synchronous, paradigmatic *structure* exists only in so far as it is itself again embodied in One, in an exceptional singular *element.*'[224]

Each time the idea of noir is reconfigured, the present (re)constitutes the past in its own image: this is key to both psychoanalysis and this project. The past may have a grip upon the present but it is the most liberating insight of psychoanalysis to understand that there is, in the present, the possibility to determine the past and what it can mean. Without the past there can of course *be* no present but nonetheless it remains possible to introduce new possibilities *into the past*. Žižek captures this when he states, 'I am determined by causes, but I retroactively determine which causes determine me.'[225] Each iteration of film noir is just such a possibility; from *Harper* to *Sin City* (and everything between and beyond) there exists a potentiality of $S_2$s to fill out $S_1$. Each time neo-noir claims classic noir as its antecedent, constitutes the noir canon as its predecessor, it suggests the ability to posit again and again a different version of the idea. The study of noir thus shows both how to understand the past *and* how to shape it (and the way in which these are inextricably linked).

[224] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 103.
[225] Žižek, *Organs*, p. 112.

## The Moment of Concluding

The inception of this project was at a juncture where – like the appearance in 1895 of the Lumière Brothers' projections at the Grand Café and of Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* – cinema and psychoanalysis appeared to coincide, and given the long-standing relationship between the two, a juncture which suggested a way in which this relation had not yet been articulated.[1] Central to this thesis from the outset has been the Elementary Cell of Lacan's Graph of Desire, which presents a diagram of the relation between past, present and future as it is understood in psychoanalytic theory. From the bi-directionality of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* and the structure of Lacan's *point de capiton* to the historical emergence of film noir (and then neo-noir) as a category and the narrative trajectories of films noirs such as *Double Indemnity*, the two vectors of the Graph – progressive and retroactive – have been found to function at every level in this investigation: filmic, cinematic and theoretical.

Starting from the observation that meaning (and therefore understanding) comes about ex post facto, the first chapter began by re-emphasising the critical truism that film noir was a category constituted very much after the fact: the "*noir*ness" of a group of films such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *Laura* was discerned by critics in France several years after their production and release in Hollywood. Of particular interest in this respect, and equally as fundamental to the project as the Lacanian Graph – was James Naremore's account of this process as the discursive construction of the idea of film noir, which involved a retroactive movement from French film criticism to Hollywood film production. The chapter then set out to establish what could be considered, in Lacanian terms, the symbolic structure involved in this relation, which

[1] Much like the coincident emergence of film noir and the popularisation of psychoanalysis in America in the 1940s.

was found to be that of Lacan's *point de capiton*: the punctuation that marks the completion of the sentence that preceded it and thus seals its meaning. This can be expressed in its simplest terms as the relationship between two signifiers: a first signifier $S_1$, which is modified by a second signifier, $S_2$, that comes after it. In this elementary structure is contained the interdependence of present, past and future involved in the temporality of psychoanalysis (as well as film noir): a signifier is spoken in the present in anticipation of its future determination by another signifier, and this future signifier then fixes the first in the past, determines it as what it always already was. In this way, both the ex post facto emergence of the idea of noir (as described by Naremore) *and* the final revelations in films noirs such as *Double Indemnity* and *D.O.A.* could be understood. The retroactive, noir temporality was found to be the same as that expressed by Lacan in his theorisation of the relationship between the diachronic and synchronic actions of the chain of signifiers. However, a paradox was revealed in this logic of retroactive meaning: that any idea of a "final" signifier is impossible because a meaning will always – by virtue of its own structure – be subject to the intervention of *another signifier* that would reconstitute its signification. $S_1$ may be determined by $S_2$ but there still remains the possibility of $S_3$, $S_4$, and so on. This can be seen, for instance, in both the continual renewal of the project to discuss and define noir, and the multiple, reworked endings to the films themselves. In both noir ontology and narrative it is then impossible to have the last word.

The unfolding of this signifying chain is what constitutes the progressive vector of the Graph $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$ and this was explored in terms of the way in which the signifier seems to anticipate the arrival of a second signifier. This was symbolised by adding three dots to the first signifier – $S_1$... – to indicate both its incompleteness and its orientation towards the future. Such anticipation of meaning was found in particular in

*Gilda* – where a series of signifiers is presented (a voice, a word, an empty frame), all of which point to the figure of Gilda herself as the $S_2$ – and *The Killers*, where Hemingway's short story is itself the first signifier that finds its determination in the elaboration of Siodmak's film as $S_2$. There was, moreover, a dimension of the Real discerned in this vector, as the $S_1$... was associated with Lacan's concept of the letter – the floating signifier – that constitutes the base material of language, and which is not in itself meaningful but only signifies once it is put into relation with another signifier.

Having identified Lacan's concept of the Real in the first chapter, the second chapter then went on to present a number of different ways through which it could be approached and found the Real to be present at, once again, both the filmic and cinematic levels in film noir. In general, this chapter was situated through the work on noir of Marc Vernet, first in the analysis of film narrative and then an interrogation of the critical category. An initial approach to the Real as trauma was explored in Vernet's discussion of the explosive disruption of the normal order presented in noir narratives. Everyday tranquillity is upset by the sudden revelation of a terrible crime, as in *Out of the Past*, which Vernet likens to the opening up of a "black hole". This was compared to Lacan's version of tuché, understood – like Freud's *Schreck* – as an unexpected and violent intrusion, which is experienced as trauma. This tychic black hole can never be symbolised but nonetheless drives the machinery of symbolisation (Lacan's automaton) and thus presents a constitutive impossibility – an absent cause – in the field of signifiers.

Through this confluence of Vernet and Lacan, the Real came to be understood not as "out there" but, as it were, "in here", at the heart of the Symbolic order. This led to an appreciation of Lacan's crucial formulisation of the concept of the big Other as lacking, barred from the inside by the Real, which could be understood as an inherent

fault in the logic of the signifier comparable to Russell's paradox. This *fault in the universe* – as Lacan describes it – is central to his theory, which insists that every structure must be found lacking because totalisation is impossible. In this light, the history of film noir – conceived of as the progressive unfolding of the chain $\underset{S_1.S_2}{\longrightarrow}$ – was explored, not in terms of the French critical perspective but the contemporaneous Hollywood discourse. In contradistinction to the Eurocentric and retrospective take on film noir commonly expressed in the critical discourse, the historical accidents of the emergence of the films understood as classic noir were examined for the ways in which such history presented a complex past that struck faults and fissures in the conventional historiography of noir. An example such as Sheri Biesen's discourse on American "red meat" crime films was itself found to be lacking, and historiography was shown to be an imperfect process. The crucial lesson that every structure is found to be lacking was reaffirmed.

More significantly, Vernet's deconstruction of the very idea of noir (as both an historical and aesthetic construction) and, for example, the founding myth of the American accommodation of a German émigré style, pointed to an utter dissolution of the critical concept and a conclusion that, in fact, film noir does not exist. The process of defining a totalising essence of noir in a Symbolic order that is inherently lacking was found to be impossible, and this pointed towards Lacan's logic of feminine sexuation as a non-universalisable, "not-all" structure where there can be no essence of womanhood because "Woman doesn't exist". Read as an expression of the Symbolic as an open set, this logic was then brought to bear on the flawed definitions of noir. Noir as a concept was understood equally as an open set, which could never be delimited from the outside and continues to admit new elements to the critical lists of films. A way of "living with the Real" in criticism was suggested by Vernet's attentiveness to the flaws

of noir and the notion of a critical topology was introduced – which proceeds from the Lacanian fault in the universe – and functions according to the principles of Lacan's concept of *lalangue*, as the signifying chain in its flawed, stuttering and open modality.

The third chapter then proceeded with a reading of the other side of the Graph of Sexuation, presenting a version of Lacan's theory of masculine structure as an "as-if" closed set, in order to approach the question of defining film noir. It was emphasised that this did not constitute a "complement" to the closed set – Lacan states that there is complementarity between the sexes – rather, it presents another mode of failure in the Symbolic. This structure entailed a return of and to the logic of suture – understood in its original context, as expressed by Miller, as the relation between the zero and the one – to account for the emergence of the "as-if" closure, which comes about as the result of the repression of lack. Such action allows for Imaginary boundaries to be constructed around the masculine set, as the limit inherent to the Symbolic is turned outwards, into an (imaginary) other of the Other – or Father-function – who stands as a transcendental guarantor.[2] It was then through this logic of exception and exclusion – as further expounded by Milner in relation to linguistics – that an approach to noir could be taken. The chapter suggested that the question of what is and, moreover, *what is not* noir was the fundamental principle of the masculine, "as-if" closed ontology. Naremore's image of the "film noir shelf" in a video store was taken as a useful schema for this operation, and Frank Krutnik's approach to the definition of noir was presented as paradigmatic of the masculine logic.

From its function in noir ontology, the operation of the Lacanian Imaginary was then traced in relation to the historiography of noir, with particular reference to the work of Thomas Elsaesser. Like Vernet, Elsaesser offers a deconstruction of the myth of noir and the history of German cinema in Hollywood, insisting that the émigré narrative

[2] "Suture" was then the name for this process of transformation of a limit into a boundary.

does not hold up. It does, however, persist because, Elsaesser suggests, it lends an imaginary coherence to the history of noir. This explicitly Lacanian invocation provided the starting point for the psychoanalytic investigation of noir historiography in Chapter 4. First, the complex temporality involved in Elsaesser's concept of the "historical imaginary" was considered. It was read, via Žižek, as an approach to the past *qua* "virtual history", and – drawing upon TS Eliot's notion of the "historical sense" – the chapter emphasised the way in which the past is made present, or even *made in the present*. This, furthermore, suggests the Bergsonian concept of introducing new possibilities *into* the past, which finds its corollary in Elsaesser's desire to "give back histories" that had been obscured by the film noir historical imaginary, in particular the idea that European cinema figured as a signifier of psychopathology in Hollywood films (such as *Stranger on the Third Floor* or *Spellbound*).

Elsaesser's suggestion of "obscured histories" then pointed to a progression of the Lacanian engagement with noir historiography in terms of the structure of (paternal) metaphor, as the repression of a (troubling) signifier. In Lacanian terms, the resultant "phallic signification" presents a set of co-ordinates for the subject by constituting language as a meaningful, consistent discourse: the introduction of an imaginary dimension to the Symbolic. This could be compared – in Žižekian terms – to an act of interpretation, which introduces order (or, meaning) where there was chaos. Similarly then, was the noir historiography found to have presented the history of noir as a meaningful whole, and the effect of this was a reverse teleology whereby the contingent, historical accidents of the past are rendered necessary from the perspective of the present. In this way, a necessary element of the historical imaginary was identified in any approach to the past that sought to constitute it as a discourse. As an example of this process, Vincendeau's investigation of Poetic Realism as an antecedent of noir was explored, and a "precursor function" similar to that identified by JL Borges

in his analysis of Kafka's place in literary history. In Ginette Vincendeau's work, the past – Poetic Realism – becomes transformed, in the present, into the necessary conditions for the very emergence of the present: in this case, a precursor to noir. Noir thus begins to function not just as *point de capiton*, but as master signifier, through which all other signifiers (which is to say, films) must be read.

The final chapter began by bringing together the theories of open and "as-if" closed structures suggested by Lacan's Graph of Sexuation in order to understand the operation of certain film noir narratives. Moving, then, once again from the cinematic to the filmic, a logic was first set out in which the conclusion of the film (in this case, *Casablanca*), *qua point de capiton*, contributes to a repression of contingency where all latent, virtual possibilities are repressed by the actual content. This repression also, of course, insisted upon *the return of the repressed*, as the relationship between the given ending and the lost endings to *Double Indemnity* was examined. *The Maltese Falcon* was then considered; instead of a "closure", it was noted that this film offers a *décapitonnage*, an opening up of narrative as the statue is revealed to be a fake. These points furthermore suggested a new relevance for the Lacanian theory of sets in the analysis of film noir narrative. A sutured structure was identified in the narrative of *Gilda*, where a neat conclusion appears to tie all plot strands together and yet still leaves certain loose ends untied. A theatrical release of *Kiss Me Deadly*, which omitted the very last shot of the film, was then taken as a means of approaching an open narrative structure in that it presented a radically unresolved and unresolvable ending that literally exploded any sense of closure.

The concept of the MacGuffin, which had been found to operate in both *Gilda* and *The Maltese Falcon*, was then carried forward and explored in relation to Lacan's use of the notion of the imaginary number. An extended reading of the latter film

provided further insight into both the structure of the narrative of *The Maltese Falcon* and an often misunderstood aspect of Lacanian theory. The √-1, like the Falcon statue, was understood to constitute a "supplement" to the field that was in itself worthless – in both cases, the object's value is understood as imaginary – but nonetheless had an appreciable effect: granting consistency, allowing the proper functioning of mathematics (and film narrative alike). The statue, in this sense, does not exist – it is a fake – and yet it is of use; it provides meaning in the face of unmeaning in a manner that recalls the operation of phallic signification. Indeed, as the coincidence of meaning and lack, the statue could be compared – following Lee Edelman – to the Lacanian phallus: a (false but necessary) guarantor of meaning, worthless material with an assumed value.

Further investigation of the epistemology at work in *The Maltese Falcon* led to a consideration of the concept of fiction, both as it functions in the film and in the relationship it could establish between Lacanian theory and Benthamite philosophy. Throughout the film certain "useful lies" are told (Miss Wonderley, the statue itself) that the characters are more than willing to treat as if they were true. Indeed, if the statue were not treated as if it were real then there would be no plot whatsoever. The crucial example here was found to be Spade's construction of a "fall guy" towards the film's end. He insists that, instead of the convoluted mess presented by the film's plot, the DA would prefer a single figure (Wilmer, the fall guy: a fake) to prosecute. The fall guy would render the prosecutor's discourse coherent and whole, but would be predicated upon a lie: a fiction. Reading Lacan and Bentham together on the subject of fiction – via *The Maltese Falcon* – insisted upon an the apprehension of an imaginary dimension to discourse that compensated for the fundamentally meaningless nature of the signifier, and the conclusion that fiction responds to the lack in the Other. The statue, the √-1 and phallic signification could thus all be understood in terms of this structure of fiction. Furthermore, such structure could also be discerned at the cinematic

level in the epistemology of noir criticism. Naremore suggests that "noir" should be retained as an heuristic, ordering principle and here he was found to be operating very closely to Freud in his approach to metapsychology, as a set of necessary assumptions (unconscious, drive) that permitted further intellectual inquiry.

Finally, this chapter returned to the structure of retroaction at work in film noir criticism to explore the retrospective formation of noir – and subsequently neo-noir – in the work of 1970s Hollywood: a discourse that was first introduced in Chapter 1 but could not be interrogated fully until this point, where the necessary theoretical tools had been established. Noir was thus understood as a function of Hollywood's relation to its own past. Through a series of revivals, revisions and re-mediations, each stage in the development of the post-noir period in Hollywood – from the 1960s to the present – posited its own notion of *what noir was* in the past. Here the double trajectory returned again, as neo-noir filmmakers such as Schrader, Scorsese and Altman proceeded, Janus-faced, to turn to the past in order to move forward with filmmaking in the present. The idea of noir was thus projected back – into Hollywood history – as the noir canon was constructed, as well as carried forward through both film criticism and practice. The result of such development has been the integration of the idea of noir into mainstream culture, to the extent that the concept now functions as *genre*. Moving forwards, noir was thus understood to function as an *empty signifier* that is filled out by *the idea of noir* with each iteration of film noir. It is made to mean anything, in any context, from graphic novels to computer games and is therefore more readily defined by example than by any stable characteristics. In this way, the relation between $S_1$ and $S_2$ could be nuanced for the last time: while the structure of the *point de capiton* described the intervention of a single signifier, $S_2$, that granted order and meaning on the past, $S_1$, as was the case construction of the idea of noir in 1946, the empty, master signifier reveals the dependency of such a single signifier, now considered $S_1$, upon a succession of

further signifiers, $S_2$s, to fill it out with positive content, (retroactively) to give it meaning, which is how "noir" now functions *qua* genre. The thesis thus ends, in a sense, where it began, with the structure and temporality of retroaction, and an interdependent relation where the past does indeed determine the present, but the present itself determines what such a past can be.

In returning then to the beginning, to begin again, this is a seemingly very obvious point: that everything from the most elementary act of speech to the most sophisticated creative works (of, for example, the cinema) is understood only ex post facto. This simple observation did, however, present a point of departure for the thesis; it allows for an opening up of the assumptions that underpin this quotidian structure of meaning. For example, the $S_1$ itself thus comes to be understood retroactively as being produced in anticipation of its meaning in the future; the production of a first signifier in this sense presupposes its reception by the Other. Indeed, one aim of this project throughout has been to show that the appearance of simplicity (in the present) often occludes a complex, even contradictory, set of elements (in the past), to explore the way in which a consistent discourse takes the place of, for example, the confused multiplicity of historical experience, retroactively constituting it *qua* past.[3] This is in fact one important aspect of psychoanalysis: to take something as singular as the symptom and discern the overdetermined and multifaceted origins that subtend it. The Wolf-Man's dream, for example, presented an image that can be summed up in a phrase – several white wolves sitting in a walnut tree – but which had to be traced back to an uncertain past and numerous encounters with the trauma of sexuality. As such, it can be seen that this engagement with the work of Lacan has brought fresh insight into the already well-explored category of film noir. First redescribing the existing analyses in

[3] However, at the same time, this project has also sought to present seemingly difficult theoretical material – such as Lacan's *Encore* – in a way which renders it as clearly and comprehensibly as possible, while still aiming to retain the necessary complexities of its formulation.

the field in a new way and then – more crucially – casting noir in its own terms, this work of Lacanian film theory has endeavoured to leave the concept of noir better examined and, in exploring the truism that underpins this concept, the structures at work both in and around film noir better understood.

Furthermore, this "simple point" does perhaps *appear* simple, or obvious, because it speaks to a more universal structure of retroaction and meaning (in film criticism). Noir is in fact a specific instance of a more general form, albeit exaggerated over a distance of some 30 years and 3,000 miles; indeed, it is this magnification of the structure of criticism and meaning in noir that necessitates its thorough theoretical investigation. Rick Altman, in his analysis of the discursive construction of genre, identifies what he calls 'the Critic's Game,' which is retrospective and fundamentally synchronic in nature: in other words, the intercession of a *point de capiton*.[4] This "game" – the act of criticism – necessarily involves a retroactive ordering of the past through the analysis of films, which – with hindsight – appear to contribute to the establishment of a generic category.[5] This presents one way in which the theoretical structure can be transferred, or perhaps expanded, to other films, other genres, or indeed the concept of genre as such. In general, an act of "criticism" (or interpretation) is necessarily an *a posteriori* intervention, a production of meaning in response to a given object or event. This is, then, the Lacanian "moment of concluding", the final, necessary stage in Lacan's formulation of Logical Time: the ex post fact determination of $S_1$ by $S_2$. It is perhaps equally as true in the case of, for example, art or literary criticism – see the previous references to Eliot and Borges – and here this thesis can speak to a more general context. There is, however, something in the intimate, dialectical relationship between production and reception – between theory and practice – in cinema that lends

[4] Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 38.
[5] Ibid., p. 38.

itself to the psychoanalytic structures expounded by Lacan. Conversely, and in keeping with the emphasis in this thesis upon bi-directional schema, Altman also identifies a 'Producer's Game,' which is prospective and constitutes the production of films within a generic discourse: in Lacanian terms, the determination of an $S_1$ by a series of $S_2$s. Indeed, while such a conclusion does insist that more than just film noir is at stake in a theory of criticism, the particular configuration of noir here described equally insists that, moving elsewhere, these insights into noir must be carried forward. The same project could not, in fact, have been achieved with another genre or category but, nonetheless, *this* project can cast light on the function of other critical concepts.

Moreover, it is in this space between two signifiers that psychoanalysis itself operates: not just as discourse, but as *cure*. This prototypical structure, $S_1...S_2$, is found throughout Lacanian psychoanalysis: Lacan, for example, defines the signifier itself as, 'that which represents a subject for another signifier,' and both Lacanian theory and practice can be understood as operating between two terms, such as Subject and Other, analyst and analysand, Φ and $S(\not{A})$.[6] The analysand comes to the analyst with some symptom, an $S_1$... in search of meaning, in the hope that the analyst – as subject supposed to know – can provide an answer, $S_2$, that will function as cure. In reality, of course, the analyst *does not know* but it is through such "belief in the symptom" that the psychoanalytic process – which takes place in this very space between the two signifiers, indicated by the ellipsis, (...) – can be initiated. This leads to another question that is crucial to the engagement between film and theory in this thesis. To recall the structure of the *point de capiton*, Lacan states that, in a sense, the sentence only *exists* once its meaning has been determined retroactively. This presents a further aspect of this project's "simple assumption" that is not immediately apparent, and one that

[6] Lacan, *S11*, p. 207. This should not, however, be understood as a binary opposition but a minimal unit of structure.

psychoanalysis is perhaps uniquely suited to interrogate: what status does this $S_1$ have before the intervention of the $S_2$?

If it has been established that "film noir" *did not*, in a very real sense, *exist* in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s – there were the films themselves ($S_1$) but the appellation "noir" ($S_2$) was still "in the future", in France – how then is it possible to talk about something that *does not exist*? This has been a fundamental concern in this project's engagement with psychoanalytic theory and film history. It is, furthermore, a problematic that troubled Freud throughout his metapsychological work: a central tenet of psychoanalysis such as the concept of the unconscious or the drive could not be *proven* to exist through empirical observation, but such existence could nonetheless be apprehended through the effects on the subject. The theory of fictions expounded by this thesis presents, therefore, a useful way in which the constructions of both film narrative and criticism can be understood to function, particularly in relation to history and constructions of the past.

It is perhaps here that, once again, an important and more general implication of this thesis resides. To recall the discussion of Chapter 3, Elsaesser, in his large collection of essays on *European Cinema*, offers something of an apologia for the notion of the historical imaginary. He professes to be 'well aware of how contested a notion it is; how it places itself between film theorists and film historians, without necessarily convincing either.'[7] As such, he seeks to minimise the import of the notion, claiming that 'it was never meant to be systematic, but to help answer a particular set of problems.'[8] However, no apology is necessary on Elsaesser's part. The "historical imaginary" is a powerful tool precisely *because of* its liminal status between theory and history: it points to the necessary relation between theory and history, a relation which

[7] Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 19-20.
[8] Ibid., p. 20.

is not always amicable in the realm of Film Studies.[9] For those who think, for instance, that "Lacan" and "history" have no business appearing together on the same page, the psychoanalytical dimension of Elsaesser's approach to historiography shows how Lacanian theory can inform the philosophy of history: the necessary understanding of how it is that history is understood. Elsaesser's concept of the historical imaginary provides a locus for some academic "marriage counselling", to bring together the unruly (and sometimes unwilling) partners in the study of film noir.

This has from the outset been an historically situated project, both in terms of its context and its approach to noir. With its foundations in the era of 1970s film theory, when film theory was interested in how film as a medium could be meaningful to its audience (Metz), it nonetheless stands apart from this semiotics of the cinema, being not a Metzian psychoanalytic engagement but a properly Lacanian one. If a critic once as ardently anti-Lacanian as Steven Shaviro can admit that, apropos of film theory, "another Lacan" is possible, and if this new wave of Lacanian film theory was first suggested by the work of Žižek (who, of course, insisted that "Lacan himself" be given a chance) and is currently represented by the vital contributions of theorists such as Todd McGowan, then this project should be considered a contribution to the continued (re)invigoration of Lacan in Film Studies. Working from an almost strictly Freudo-Lacanian perspective in the first chapter, where the crucial theoretical concepts were laid out, and moving in later chapters – still very much *with* Lacan – into the work of contemporary post-Lacanian theory, this project has striven to put the Lacan back into Lacanian film theory, beginning with the concept of the *point de capiton* and the structure of noir.[10] Building out critically from the original juncture of cinema and

[9] As such, the concept is similar to psychoanalysis itself: its status "in between" – for example, science and philosophy, or clinic and theory – is what makes it both interesting and useful in an interdisciplinary approach such as this thesis.

[10] This is, then, in contrast to McGowan's work such as *The Real Gaze*, which focuses on Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts, and particularly the *objet (a)*.

psychoanalysis yet addressing similar questions – indeed, the thesis does at one point turn to that central tenet of the old "Lacanian film theory", suture, to "put the Miller back in" as it were, in returning the concept to its original context as the logic of the signifier – and in contradistinction to the current movements in film-philosophy, this project sought to explore not how they think or feel, but *how films mean*: how their structures bring about meaningfulness (through narrative), and how similar structures can be discerned in the discursive construction of a critical category, such as noir, to which these films are said to belong.

More generally, the aim throughout has been to bring together film (noir) and psychoanalysis in productive ways. For example, Chapters 2 and 3 laid out an approach to set theory that endeavoured to articulate Lacanian theory in a new way, in order to shed light on the concept of film noir as a critical category *and* the structures and functions of certain film noir narratives. A reading of Lacan's notion of sexuation was presented that addressed some often misunderstood concepts such the "not-all", which then led into an in-depth exploration of both the processes through which critics have sought to define noir and the ways in which films noirs themselves both invite and resist narrative closure. Conversely, Chapter 4 attempted to investigate *The Maltese Falcon* in a novel way in order to provide a new reading of Lacanian theory: to expose a new dimension of its relation to philosophy. A close reading of the film, and in particular the role the Falcon statue plays in the workings of the narrative, suggested a perhaps overlooked dimension of Lacan's work that brought it closer to the thought of Jeremy Bentham than even Lacan himself had contemplated. This project has endeavoured to show at every point that – far from no longer having enough to say about film – Lacan and cinema must be brought together, again and again, in order to discover the new and original insights such a mutual engagement can provide.

Like the structure of noir that has here been identified, the work of Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory might then entail a repeated process of "return with difference", turning back as it must time and again to the work of Lacan (as Lacan himself insisted his work must (re)turn always to Freud) in order to move forward, to formulate new ways of engaging with the cinema, while at the same time seeking out those instances where the cinema itself offers challenges to Lacanian theory. The work of such film theory can (and must) never be concluded because – like the idea of noir as it has been reiterated with each development in the New Hollywood – the psychoanalytic approach is made anew with each fresh intervention. It is an ethical imperative for the Lacanian theorist never to forget the origins of this discourse in the clinic and the analysis of psychopathology, but nevertheless film theory remains a crucial venue for the expression of psychoanalytic principles, just as psychoanalysis *must be retained* for the invaluable and inimitable perspective it provides on the structures of the cinema.

**Appendix 1**

**Figure 1** – Elementary Cell of the Graph of Desire (*Écrits*, p. 681)

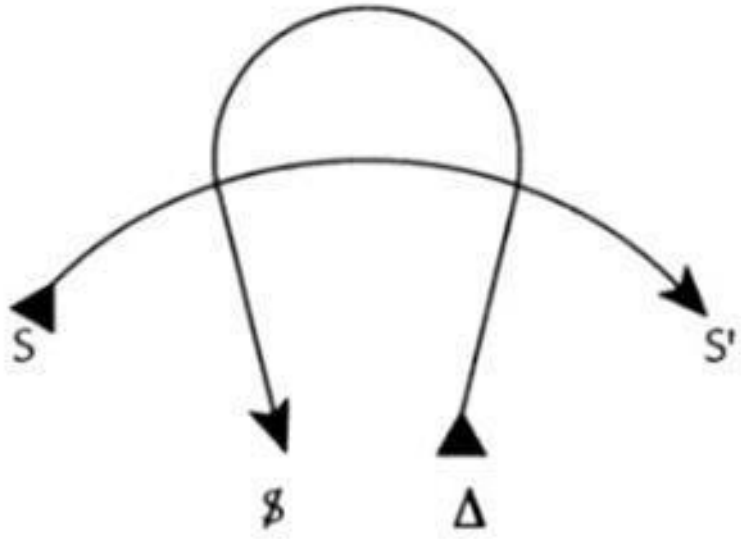



**Figure 2** – Second Iteration of the Graph of Desire (*Écrits*, p. 684)

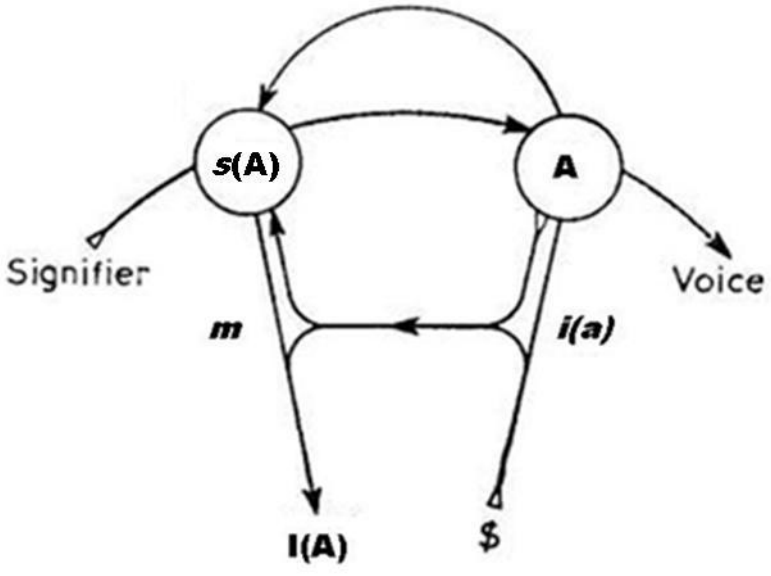
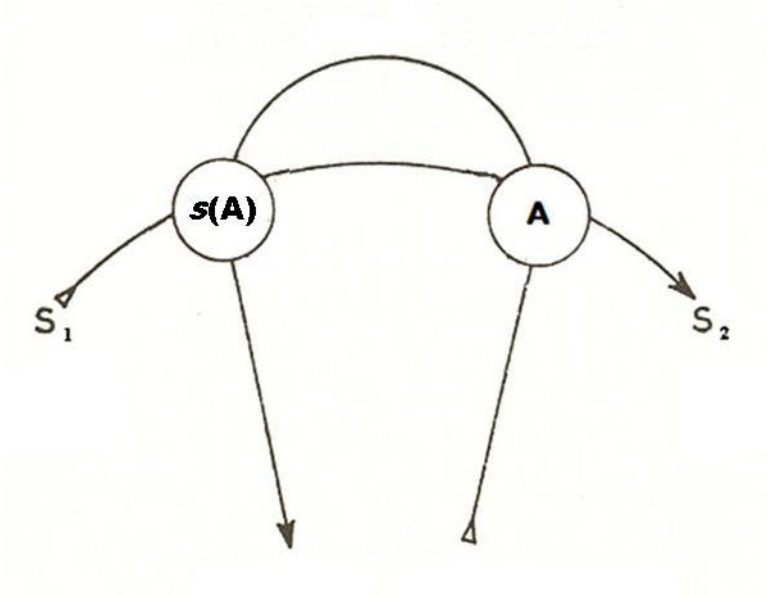


**Figure 3** – Modified version of the elementary cell of the Graph of Desire

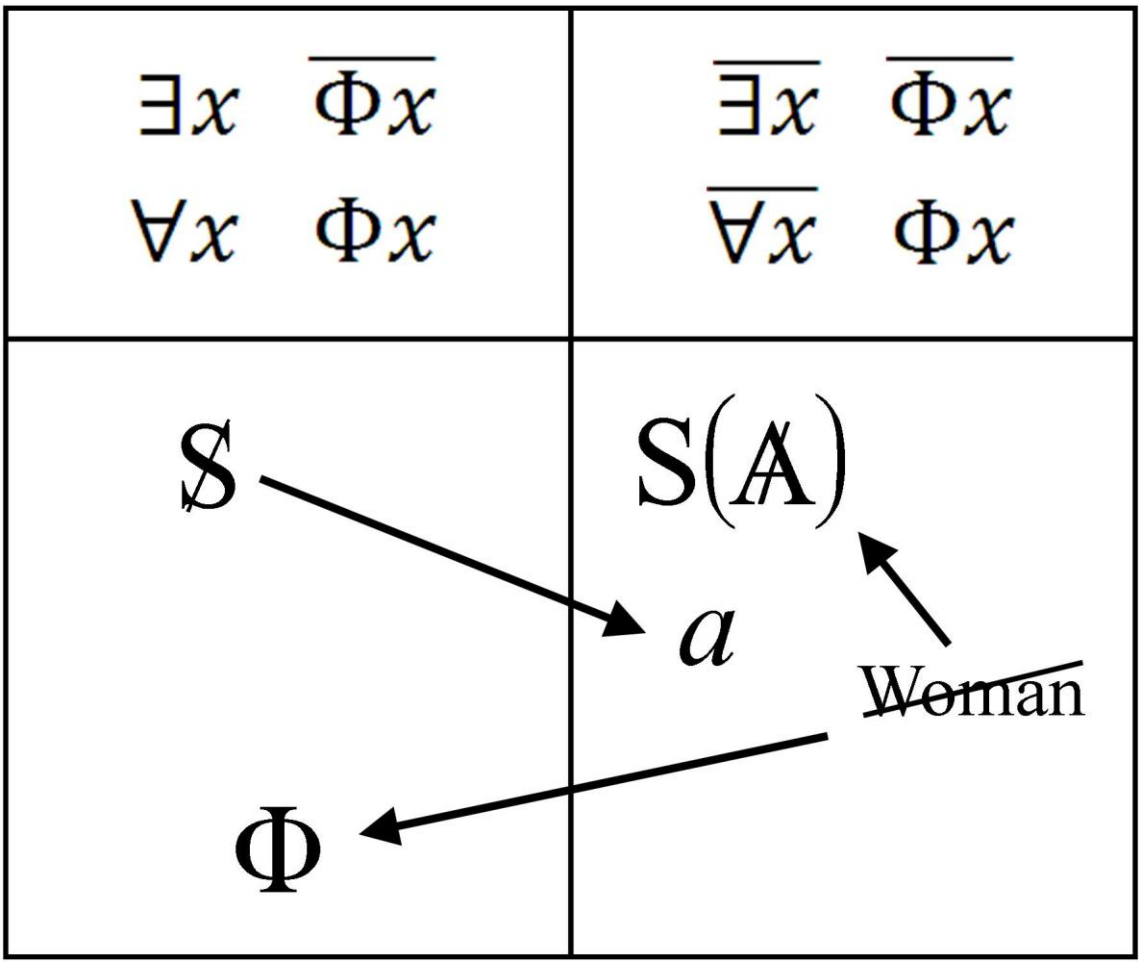



Žižek points out that the succession of the four forms of the graph 'cannot be reduced to a linear gradual completion' and therefore implies itself 'the retroactive changing of preceding forms.'[1] The intersections "*s*(A)" and "A" can thus be thought of as always-already designated on the Elementary Cell in the way that is suggested in this modified version.

[1] Žižek, *SOI*, p. 97.

**Appendix 2**

**Figure 4** –The Graph of Sexuation (*S20*, p. 78)



**Filmography**

*À bout de souffle*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. France, SNC, 1960.

*Abschied*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. Germany, UFA, 1930.

*Against All Odds*. Dir. Taylor Hackford. USA, Columbia Pictures, 1984.

*The Asphalt Jungle*. Dir. John Huston, USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1950.

*Attack!*. Dir. Robert Aldrich. USA, Associates & Aldrich Company, 1956.

*The Band Wagon*. Dir. Vincente Minelli. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953.

*La Bandera*. Dir. Julien Duvivier. France, SNC, 1935.

*Ben Hur*. Dir. William Wyler. USA, MGM, 1959.

*La Bête humaine*. Dir. Jean Renoir. France, Paris Film, 1939.

*The Big Gamble*. Dir. Fred Niblo. USA, RKO Pathé Pictures, 1931.

*The Big Heat*. Dir. Fritz Lang. USA, Columbia Pictures, 1953.

*The Big Sleep*. Dir. Howard Hawks, USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1946.

*The Bigamist*. Dir. Ida Lupino. USA, The Filmakers, 1953.

*Der blaue Engel*. Dir. Josef von Sternberg. Germany, UFA, 1930.

*The Blue Dahlia*. Dir. George Marshall. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1946.

*Body Heat*. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. USA, The Ladd Company, 1981.

*Bonnie and Clyde*. Dir. Arthur Penn. USA, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1967.

*Bringing Up Baby*. Dir. Howard Hawks. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1938.

*Des Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene. Germany, Decla-Bioscop AG, 1920.

*Casablanca*. Dir. Michael Curtiz. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1942.

*Casbah*. Dir. John Berry. USA, Marston Productions, 1948.

*Casino*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. USA/France, Universal Pictures, 1995.

*Cat People*. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1942.

*Cat People*. Dir. Paul Schrader. USA, Universal Pictures, 1982.

*La Chienne*. Dir. Jean Renoir. USA, Les Établissements Braunberger-Richebé, 1931.

*Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1974.

*Christmas Holiday*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. USA, Universal Pictures, 1944.

*Citizen Kane*. Dir. Orson Welles. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.

*Conflict*. Dir. Curtis Bernhardt. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945.

*La Crise est finie*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. France, Nero-Film AG, 1934.

*D.O.A.*. Dir. Rudolph Maté. USA, Cardinal Pictures, 1950.

*The Dark Mirror*. Dir. Robert Siodmak. USA, International Pictures, 1946.

*The Day of the Jackal*. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. UK/France, Warwick Film Productions, 1973.

*Le Dernier Tournant*. Dir. Pierre Chenal. USA, Gladiator Productions, 1939.

*Detour*. Dir. Edgar G Ulmer. USA, PRC, 1945.

*Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. USA, Paramount Pictures, 1944.

*A Double Life*. Dir. George Cukor. USA, Garson Kanin Productions, 1947.

*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dir. Victor Fleming. USA, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1941.

*A Drunkard's Reformation*. Dir. DW Griffith. USA, American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1909.

*The Enforcer*. Dir. Bretaigne Windust. USA, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1951.

*The Falcon Takes Over*. Dir. Irving Reis. USA, RKO Radio Pictures, 1942.

*Fantômas*. Dir. Louis Feuillade. France, Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont, 1913.

*Femme Fatale*. Dir. Brian De Palma. France, Epsilon Motion Pictures, 2002.

*Force of Evil*. Dir. Abraham Polonsky. USA, Enterprise Productions, 1948.

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